

Angels

Jade-Max

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

TPM AU - What if Anakin had been older than Padmé at the time of their first meeting on Tatooine? Anakin is 16, Padmé is 14

Chapter 1

Disclaimer: It's George's sandbox; I'm simply destroying the sandcastles

Title: Angels

Author: Jade-Max

Genre: a "What If" — Drama, Romance

Timeframe: TPM — AU

Summary: What if Anakin had been older than Padmé at the time of their first meeting on Tatooine? (Anakin is 16, Padmé is 14)

Angels

Chapter 1

Padmé stepped into the small junk shop with a slight wrinkle of distaste marring the bridge of her nose. It was clean, she gave it that, but crowded. Piles of junk, half-repaired robots, bits and pieces of every ship system she knew about and those she didn't littered every nook and cranny. The floor was covered in a fine layer of sand — but then, everything she'd seen thus far on Tatooine was.

Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn was speaking with the shop owner and she paid him little mind, instead turned to look at the flickering image of a pod racer with the silhouette of a young man standing beside it that was mounted above the main desk. A bent head behind the desk caught her gaze. Curly dark hair spilling low over forehead and cheek, hid their features from view and she stepped forward curiously. Whoever it was seemed to be completely absorbed in what they were doing.

"Hello?"

Padmé's breath caught as the owner of those curls looked up and was snared immediately by the clearest crystal blue eyes she'd ever seen. It took her a minute to realize that the boy, who looked about her age, hadn't responded; he was staring at her the way she was staring at him. Heat suffused her cheeks and she tore her gaze away from his. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you."

"You didn't."

Padmé's breath caught. His voice was mellow, caught somewhere between adult-hood and that of a child. It didn't crack, but it held the hint of deeper tones to come. She dared another look at him and took a half-step back. He'd stood up. He was well on his way to being six feet tall, if she didn't miss her guess. She darted a look back towards where Qui-Gon had disappeared with the shop owner.

"If we have what you're looking for, they might haggle over price all afternoon. I wouldn't hold your breath," the boy told her, hesitance evident in each of the syllables.

Padmé's shoulders dropped. "Oh." She turned back to the boy, curiously drawn to him, feeling safe in his presence the way she did in Master Jinn's. She struggled for something to say, but the boy's intent gaze was flustering her, making her brain act like mush. What was wrong with her?

"I'm Anakin," he finally ventured.

She exhaled, feeling both relieved and chagrined he'd had to be the one to rescue her. "I'm pleased to meet you, Anakin. I'm Padmé."

Anakin smiled, his lips tilting into a grin that revealed even white teeth. "Padmé." He repeated her name, taking another look at her. "Are you in disguise?"

She jerked as if struck. What did he just say? "P-pardon?"

He stepped closer, around the desk, looking at her carefully. "I asked if you were in disguise. It must be hard to hide your wings."

"My wings?" Padmé echoed, feeling at a complete loss. What was he talking about?

Anakin nodded, solemnly, but his eyes sparkled. "Must be hard to walk around mortals for an angel. Want to tell me what it's like?"

Padmé blinked, the words sinking in slowly, as she took in the seriousness of his expression coupled with the sparkle in his gaze. "You're making fun of me."

"Never." His expression turned contrite and he backed away, hitting the desk with his hip and almost stumbling. He looked away, embarrassed "I'm sorry if you think so. I just... you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

"Thank you." The response was automatic, a warmth spreading through her chest. 'That's nice of you to say so.' Padmé followed him, not quite certain why, as he rounded the desk and bent back to what he was doing. "What do you do here, Anakin?"

He didn't look up again as he picked up several tools, discarding one and the another before he found the one he was looking for. He set to work on a piece of machinery that was sitting in pieces behind the desk. "My Master," and Padmé could hear the hatred in his voice, "keeps me busy."

She fell back, shocked. "You're a slave?"

His head came up, his blue eyes blazing fire. "I'm a person. Like you or that Jedi you're with. I have thoughts and feelings and I have a name."

Padmé blanched. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't..."

He ducked his head, going back to the part he was fixing. "Forget it."

Qui-Gon returned at that moment, his face a shuttered mask. "We're leaving."

Padmé looked after the Jedi Master and back to Anakin, torn. She didn't want to leave him like that, in such a foul mood. They may have just met, but she had this need to—

“Handmaiden.”

Padmé met Anakin’s gaze as his head snapped up. She met it. “I’m sorry, Anakin, I didn’t mean to make you angry. It was nice meeting you.”

Anakin’s lips kicked into a half-smile, the anger disappearing, either buried or forgotten. “I’ll see you again, Padmé. Sooner than you think.”

She darted from the junk shop, Anakin’s gaze on her fleeing form. He smiled then and began to whistle, going back to his repairs. If he finished shortly, Watto would send him home early — and he’d run into the Jedi and Padmé again. He was looking forward to their next encounter.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Anakin finished his work early and was sent home to rest.

He caught sight of the outlanders immediately; the girl especially. She was flat on her back being threatened by a very familiar Dug. Despite her prone position and the Jedi moving to intercede, Anakin could see the ire blazing from her eyes. The strange looking creature she'd been with was on the ground next to her and it didn't take a genius to see that it was the creature who'd gotten them into the predicament.

Anakin almost smile as he stepped in. "Watch it, Sebulba," he told the Dug in huttese, drawing his attention, "They're big time outlanders. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you before we race again."

The Dug pushing himself upon his legs as high as he could go, but the diminutive stature of the Dug only came to Anakin's chest, and the fury blazing in those black eyes was unmistakable. "If you weren't a slave, boy, I'd crush you here and now! You won't walk away next time we race!"

Anakin's eyes narrowed. He knew better than to pick a fight with Sebulba, at least one in public. He slapped the Dug's pointed fingers away from his chest. "Yeah, it'd be a shame if you'd have to pay for me."

Sebulba snorted, moving back to the table where he'd been sitting prior to the whole incident. It was the table he always used when not racing. Anakin ignored him, crouching next to the prone young woman and her strange looking companion. Padmé was staring up at him in astonishment. Anakin switched back to basic, offering her his hand. "I wouldn't pick fights with beings from this city. It's a good way to disappear — or end up a slave of the Hutts."

Padmé's gaze disappeared over his left shoulder and Anakin saw the Jedi's hand coming to rest on his shoulder. He managed not to flinch when that image came to pass a moment later and the strong, capable hand of the Jedi fell on his shoulder and squeezed. Just enough to give him a warning. "Thank you for your help, young man."

Anakin helped Padmé to her feet as the Jedi moved beyond him and offered the strange looking creature his hand. He didn't address the Jedi until everyone was on their feet. Finally, he turned, and met the Jedi's gaze. "It was nothing. Your friends just happened to pick the wrong Dug to have words with. Sebulba doesn't take kindly to anyone but himself."

"I'm Qui-Gon Jinn, this is Jar Jar Binks, and—"

"Padmé." Anakin's gaze drifted back to her — and found her staring at him, the color in her cheeks heightened. 'I know. We met at Watto's. It's nice to meet you, sir. All of you. I'm Anakin.' Anakin felt the Jedi's gaze on him and forced his own to travel back to the older man. "You all look like you're a little lost, if you don't mind me saying so."

Qui-Gon looked impassive, to Anakin's gaze, but he could feel the surprise the Jedi was quick to hide. He managed not to smirk; what would the Jedi think if he knew Anakin was capable of reading his carefully controlled emotions? *Probably not too much*, was the sour thought that followed. *Jedi look out for their own, no one else*. Anakin managed a shrug and an easy smile that he directed at the Jedi, even as his gaze lingered on the young woman. "I'd be happy to show you around; having local help means avoiding situations like that one."

Qui-Gon looked at his companions and then finally nodded, though there was a wariness and a reluctance in the movement. "Any help you can offer would be much appreciated, Anakin."

"This way. The hottest part of the day's coming up. Anyone who doesn't have to be out isn't. Dealers are more relaxed once things start to cool down."

"Does it ever get cold?" Padmé's question was curious.

Anakin shrugged. "Cold enough. If you're out in the middle of the dunes at night the temperature plummet to below freezing. The settlements like this one provide enough change that the ambient temperature, even at night, is bearable." He grinned sheepishly. "If you're a desert dweller that is. I hear off worlders often have trouble with the heat here."

Anakin led them to a shaded area nearby where one of his oldest friends, an older woman by the name of Jira was selling food and drinks from her cart. He charmed her, conscious the whole time of Padmé's eyes in particular on him, and treated them all to a snack. He caught a glimpse of the Jedi's lightsaber — the confirmation he'd been watching for — but didn't mention it.

Finally the old woman looked up in a way that Anakin had become familiar with over the years and he waited patiently for the accurate storm prediction. "My bones are aching, Ani. Storm's coming, and a bad one by the feel of it."

Anakin flushed at the old nick name she still insisted on calling him, hoping the others wouldn't notice and turned to the Jedi. "Her weather sense is never wrong. Do you have shelter?"

Qui-Gon looked to the old woman and then back to Anakin. "We'll head back to our ship. We'll weather the storm well enough there."

Anakin arched his eyebrows in surprise. "You'll never make it, Qui-Gon... sir." The respectful address was added almost as an after thought. "Sand storms kick up far faster than any other kind of storm I've ever heard about. It'll be on us in minutes; you'll be lucky if you don't get lost out there. My place isn't far; you can wait it out there."

"We couldn't impose—" Padmé began, placing her hand on Qui-Gon's arm.

"No imposition. I don't invite those I don't want to have over. This way."

The sand was already swirling about their feet, giving testimony to the swiftness of the storm's formation and a hint at its ferocity. Padmé's voice drifted to Anakin as he turned to see if they were following. "We don't have a choice, Qui-Gon. I, for one, have no desire to be caught out in the middle of a sand storm."

The corner of Anakin's mouth kicked into a half-smile as Padmé turned to follow him. He wiped the grin off his face and turned, lifting one arm to protect his face as the sand began to swirl. He slitted his eyes, confident in the knowledge that the others were following, and slowly led the way back to his house.

Anakin ran a hand through his hair as he stepped inside and quickly aside out of the raging sand storm to allow his guests to enter. Padmé followed first, stepping his way as she shook sand from her hair. The Jedi and Gungan entered after the astromech and the door closed behind them. A voice, that brought a grin to Anakin's face, spoke almost immediately.

"Hello, I am C3PO, human cyborg relations. How may I be of assistance?"

Padmé jumped, bumping into Anakin as the prissy tones filled the small dwelling. Anakin steadied her with a hand on her shoulder and then drew back immediately as if he'd been burned, color flooding his cheeks. He turned away. "I've brought guests for dinner, 3PO."

"Master Anakin!" The dull, mismatched covering on the lanky droid as he shuffled this way and that, watching the visitors gave him character. "Welcome home. How many are we serving this evening?"

Anakin shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. "Uh, four and you and R2D2."

The little astromech beeped at the protocol droid and introductions were made. Much to Anakin's amusement the protocol droid seemed to take to the astromech immediately; as if he'd been craving the company of another droid.

Padmé was staring at C3PO, amazed, and slanted a questioning look at Anakin. "I thought you said you were... uh, I mean..."

"A slave?" Anakin's repetition of it was humorous this time. "I am. I built 3PO from bits and pieces. He was mostly for helping my mom, but when she was bought and freed by Cleigg Lars, she wanted me to keep him until they can raise the money to buy me too."

Anakin had moved them into the small complex. A warren of five rooms. Three sleeping rooms, a dining room, and a small 'fresher. There was also a large balcony that would provide an unobstructed view of the stars. He settled into one of the chairs at the table, motioning for the others to do the same. "I never learned to cook, so 3PO handles most of it."

"I'm always happy to serve, Master Anakin."

Anakin grinned, but it was quick to fade as Qui-Gon pinned him with a look. "What?"

"I think there's more to your story than you're letting on, young man."

Anakin shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "And if there is?"

Qui-Gon placed his elbows on the table and folded his hands in front of him, regarding the younger man shrewdly. "Why would your mother leave her only child in slavery?"

Anakin flushed, looking away. His fingers drew absent circles on the table top. He didn't look inclined to answer.

“Oh, Mistress Shmi was most distraught, Master Jinn.” 3PO jumped in. “She did not want to leave Master Anakin, but he insisted so go. It was quite remarkable, actually.”

“3PO.”

“Yes, Master Anakin?”

Anakin waved his towards the kitchenette. “You have better things to be doing than gossiping about my life.”

“Facts are not—”

“3PO!”

The droid turned and shuffled off, muttering to itself. Anakin turned an embarrassed look to his guests. “Sorry about that, I’m still working on his programming. I’m better with the physical parts and still learning software.”

Padmé regarded him intently, her intelligent brown eyes searching his face. “Is it true?”

“What?”

“Padmé.” The Jedi Master’s tone was cautionary.

Padmé didn’t so much as glance at Qui-Gon. “What 3PO said — about you insisting your mother go without you?”

Anakin sighed, slumping down in his chair a little and shot the droid’s back a dark look. “Mom didn’t want to leave me behind, but Watto’s won’t sell me. I’m too valuable at the track.”

“The track?” Padmé cocked her head at him curiously.

Anakin dropped his gaze to his hands — which seemed to have a mind of their own and were playing with the worry stone he kept on the table. He put the stone down, placing his palm flat against the rough surface. He glanced up for a moment. “Have you ever heard of pod racing?”

Padmé shook her head and Qui-Gon’s look was guardedly inquisitive. “They have pod racing on Malastare. Very fast; very dangerous.”

Anakin perked up a little, casting a side long look at Padmé. “I’m the only human that can do it.”

Padmé looked to Qui-Gon before looking back to Anakin, her expression skeptical. “How come?”

Qui-Gon answered for her. “You must have Jedi reflexes if you race pods.”

Anakin shrugged. “I don’t know much about Jedi or their reflexes. But from what I hear, no other human has ever been able to race pods.”

“How come?”

Padmé looked distinctly interested and Anakin managed not to fidget. This was his element, his arena. He knew about pod racing the way the Jedi knew about the Force. “Like

Qui-Gon said; it's very dangerous. You have to have split second reflexes and, if you're off by even half a second... *BAM!* You're splattered against a rock!" Anakin's eyes sparkled with the remembered excitement and adrenaline rush that always accompanied the danger.

Padmé withdrew, horrified. "That's horrible!"

Anakin shrugged, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "Watto insists. I've been racing for him for a couple of years now; most racers don't last their first season, let alone two, almost three."

"You must be very good — or very lucky."

Anakin's gaze turned to Qui-Gon, despite Padmé's almost cynical comment. He met the Jedi's gaze and arched his eyebrows. "Or guided by a higher hand, right Master Jedi?"

Padmé looked at Qui-Gon alarmed, but the Jedi Master simply folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. "What makes you believe I'm a Jedi, Anakin?"

"The lightsaber on your belt for starters." Anakin told him bluntly. "Your talk of Jedi reflexes for another. Jedi aren't exactly subtle when they show up and try to wreck your life."

Qui-Gon stared at the young man curiously, a mild shock and curiosity radiating off him.

Anakin pushed back from the table, almost knocking his chair over in the process. "Forget it. I'll be back in a minute."

"Anakin—"

Anakin disappeared into the hallway, ignoring the short protest and cutting it off with the door as he stepped into his bedroom. He leaned back against it, closing his eyes as he fought back the bitterness that was threatening to choke him. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the door and took a deep breath.

"Anakin?"

Padmé's concerned tone on the other side of the door was enough to open his eyes. He pushed back the resentment, burying it back into the recesses of his subconscious, and answered her. "Yeah?"

"Are you alright?"

The way she said the words made it very clear she wouldn't be leaving until she got an answer. He smiled faintly, feeling the nervousness she was trying to hide and opened the door. She stood in profile, her head cocked at an angle, facing back towards the kitchen where she'd left the Jedi and Jar Jar.

Anakin was struck in that instant once more by her beauty. The innocent curve of her jaw as it was tilted to allow her ear to rest near the door. He managed not to stare. "I'm fine."

Her gaze flew to his and she shifted, turning in his direction, her brown eyes pools of worry. "Oh. It's just you left so suddenly, I thought Qui-Gon might have insulted you."

"A little." Was his honest response, accompanied by a slight smile. "I don't trust Jedi."

She blinked, caught by surprise. “But they’re the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy. There’s no reason not to trust them.”

Anakin looked towards the kitchenette, the flash of Jar Jar sticking his head around the corner running through his mind in an instant. Not thinking, he grabbed Padmé by the elbow and pulled her into his room, closing the door before the vision came to pass. He held up his finger for silence as she stared at him in shock.

Jar Jar’s confusion was clearly audible, as was Qui-Gon’s calm assurance that Padmé was fine, though Anakin could feel Qui-Gon’s concern. More for the girl’s continued safety. His lips twisted bitterly. Trust a Jedi to question the reason for offering assistance.

“Anakin?”

He turned to look at her as she said his name in a hushed tone. Her hair fell from her high hair style, pooling about her face and shoulders in a chocolate wave. He itched to touch it, to feel what those curls would be like between his fingers. He clenched his fists. “Sorry. But if you want to talk about this I won’t do it where we’ll be interrupted.”

She arched her eyebrows. “Is it that bad?”

Anakin could see the tension in her frame, he could sense her nervousness. He leaned back against the door and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Did I say you were?”

He chewed the inside of his cheek. She hadn’t exactly said it, not in words, but how to explain? He didn’t know. But he figured he’d try anyway. He met her gaze. “Not in words, no.” He held up one hand before she opened her mouth to ask the obvious question. “I can explain.”

“I hope so. You’re starting to scare me.”

“You don’t have to be scared of me, Padmé. I’ll never do anything to hurt you.”

“How do I know that?”

He stayed where he was, wondering if now was the time to back off, or if he should just out and say it. She *felt* open, impressionable. Like she’d be able to handle what he had to say; but his feelings had been wrong before. He opted for a milder version. “I suppose you can’t know for sure; not really. Would it help you to know that I feel connected to you; that I feel as if your destiny and mine are linked somehow?”

“You sound like a Jedi.”

“I’m no Jedi — thankfully.”

“Then maybe you should have been.”

“Maybe.” Anakin shrugged uncomfortably. “But if the rest of the Jedi are like the one who set me on this path then I want no part of it.”

“Set you on what path?”

Anakin's smile died and he pushed off the door, reaching for the handle. Padmé was on him in an instant. "Anakin."

He pulled his hand away from hers as her fingers grazed the back of his hand. His hand tingled and a flash of a future, a distant future, assaulted his senses. A future that included the young woman before him.

"Anakin?"

He mentally shook himself and found he was looking down into Padmé's concerned brown orbs yet again. "Yeah?"

"You have the strangest look on your face; is everything okay?"

"Sure. Qui-Gon's worried about you; he doesn't trust me."

"Should he? We've only known you for a few hours."

Anakin met her gaze, staring at her intently. "*You* can trust me, Padmé. I'll never do anything to hurt *you*."

She stared back at him, caught in the blue crystal of his gaze and then turned away, blushing becomingly. "You never did answer my question."

"Which one?"

"Padmé."

They both jumped as Qui-Gon's voice drifted into the short corridor. She smiled apologetically. "Are you alright to come back?"

He nodded, grateful for the reprieve from her questions and motioned for her to lead the way.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Jar Jar dozed off shortly after a tense meal that Anakin let his droid fill with various bits of conversation. The outlanders spoke of their highly secretive mission and necessity for the parts they needed, as well as where they were going. Padmé eventually asked about him, but Anakin deftly steered the conversation away from himself, though he spoke easily about slavery in general.

With neither the Jedi nor Padmé commenting on the bitter undertone he couldn't quite keep out of his voice, he told them of how, at the age of ten, he and his mother had been won by Watto in a bet on the pod racing circuit. They'd spent three years having Watto exploit his mechanical aptitude before he'd begun racing. He didn't go into detail and the curious look Padmé shot him told him she wasn't fooled by how he avoided the subject.

Finally, Anakin settled back from his meal and wiped his lips with a piece of cloth that passed for a napkin. "Needless to say, slavery is alive and well on Tatooine."

"Why don't you just run away?"

"Every slave has an implant to prevent it — so that if they do decide to run away their master can simply flick a switch and blow them up."

"That's horrible!"

"That's life," Anakin took a sip of his drink and shrugged. He wasn't about to mention the fact that the whole transceiver was a lie. He'd built a machine to scan himself and found nothing. It was simply a fear tactic to keep the slaves in line. Anakin was betting that some day he could use it to his advantage — he just didn't know how yet. "Besides, where would I go? Everything I know is here."

"You could come with us," Padmé told him, and then blushed hotly as if she realized what she'd said.

"It's not that I don't appreciate the offer, Padmé, really I do, but you can't even afford the parts for your ship. How could you possibly afford to pay for me? I'm worth more to Watto if I'm under his employ."

"Speaking of ship parts," Qui-Gon broke in; he'd been watching the young man — a curious mix of childhood innocence and grown-up cynicism — intently. "Is there anything that Watto would take in trade for them seeing as how we don't have the credits?"

Anakin's gaze flicked directly to Padmé and then back to his glass. There was something alright. "No; nothing."

"He's got to have a weakness of some kind," Padmé pressed. "Something that we can exploit."

“Nothing you could exploit without funds, Padmé. Watto’s only vices are credits and betting on the pod races.”

Qui-Gon stroked his beard thoughtfully and Anakin tried to ignore the look.

“Nothing at all?” Padmé pressed.

Anakin flushed guiltily under her pleading gaze and slumped in his chair. “Well, there is maybe one thing.”

“What?”

He didn’t look up, instead used his thumb to pick sand from under one nail and watched the grains intently. “You could enter my pod in the Boonta Eve race tomorrow and, if I win, the winnings would more than cover the cost of the parts you need.”

“Your pod?”

Anakin nodded, still not looking up, feeling as if he was standing directly under the twin suns at high noon. “Yeah. Watto doesn’t know I’ve been building it.”

“Does it work?”

Anakin’s head jerked up at the Jedi’s no-nonsense tone and was stung into responding. “It will — once I find a power source. I can show it to you after the storm lets up. It’ll be the fastest racer ever built — one that even Sebulba won’t be able to beat!”

“You’re very confident.”

“I should be, Master Jedi,” he refused to call the Jedi by his first name. “I’ve had almost ten years of practicing my mechanical skills. C3P0 was a project I did when I was a kid and bored — when I needed to use my hands. I started building my pod racer when my step brother, Owen, began smuggling in parts for me early this season.”

“Why would your step brother smuggle parts in for you?”

“Why not?” Anakin met Padmé’s gaze for a brief moment before looking back to his hands. One was clenched, the knuckles turning white. “The idea was to make Watto believe the pod racer is Owen’s and wager me against the winnings — with me as the driver — in one of the bigger races.” He swallowed hard, realizing what he was offering to give up in helping them.

“We can’t let you give up your chance at freedom just to help us.” Padmé’s tone was firm and uncompromising causing him to look up in surprise. He caught her watching Qui-Gon with a dark expression. “We’ll just have to find another way.”

Qui-Gon wasn’t looking at the fiery young woman; his gaze had never left Anakin.

Anakin avoided the Jedi’s gaze, feeling the muscles in his stomach curl, the insistent feeling that had been pushing him towards this conversation all evening exploding into the fore-front of his mind. Bile rose in his throat and he cleared it. “The decision isn’t yours, Padmé.”

“Anakin—”

“No,” he shook his head, finally lifting it completely to look at her with certainty. *This was the path, his senses were screaming. This is why building the pod racer has been of utmost importance. To help this young woman get on with her journey.* He managed a faint smile. “The choice is mine. If you can convince Watto that the pod racer is yours, and for him to let me pilot it, I’ll make sure you have the parts you need.”

“And your freedom, Anakin?” Qui-Gon asked knowingly.

“I won’t be a slave forever, Master Jedi. I’ll simply have to wait until opportunity knocks again.”

Anakin cautiously opened the back patio door to his small home and checked for swirling sand. The wind had died several minutes earlier, and he’d wanted to be sure it wasn’t simply a lull. Everything was quiet, the flat plains of sun-bleached granules stretching out beyond towards the slowly setting suns. He stepped out, taking a quick look around, and then eagerly jumped the ledge to the courtyard below.

Or rather, the small walled enclosure that passed as one. Inside it was a sleek, angular metal body with a bucketed seat in the center, done in a blue and white paint scheme. He patted the nose lovingly, running his hands along it in a possessive caress and enjoying the feel of polished metal against his hands. The sleek lines of the craft were all angled specifically for speed. The nacelles, two large tubular engines which held yet untested speed capacity, lay on either side, attached by cables to the body. It was the feeling of freedom under his finger tips.

Anakin glanced back up towards the balcony and grinned. “She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

“She’s wonderful,” Padmé agreed, taking the stairs to join him on the ground.

Qui-Gon crossed his arms over his chest and looked thoroughly unimpressed. “She certainly looks like she’s built for speed, Anakin. Here.” He pulled a cylindrical object from a fold in his robes and tossed it to the young man. “Try this.”

“Thanks.” Anakin caught the object, turning it over one in his hands and then bent over the racer’s control panels. Padmé reached the ground as Anakin finished connecting the power cell to the pod racer and stood back. He grinned at her eagerly. “Shall we see what it does?”

She nodded; his enthusiasm catching.

Anakin vaulted over the side and into the body of the racer. He leaned back, almost completely disappearing into the metallic body and he knew the moment Padmé realized there was only a thin shell of metal between him and the ground. Her eyes widened and she looked at him in shock.

“You don’t have a death wish, do you?”

He grinned, laughing. “Never. Hold on!”

Padmé stepped back two steps as Anakin adjusted the power flow and hit the ignition switch. It took a couple of tries before the engines spewed black smoke and then coughed to

life, whirring up with a powerful roar. Anakin let out a whoop, punching one fist in the air, elation and adrenaline coursing through him as the magnitude of his accomplishment hit him.

“Yeah!!”

Padmé’s delighted laughter was drowned out by the roar of the engines, but there was no mistaking the set of the Jedi’s shoulders on the balcony above. Anakin smile was feral. Let him doubt. He, Anakin Skywalker, was going to win the Boonta Eve classic — he just knew it!

After the successful trial of the pod racer, Anakin wasted no time in letting Qui-Gon know that the sound would have carried. If Qui-Gon was going to make anything happen, or hope Watto would believe that he’d won it in a game of chance, they had to act quickly. Anakin volunteered to run ahead and soften up his Master; Watto would take it better coming from his pilot than from an outlander.

Qui-Gon bowed to Anakin’s greater knowledge of the situation and agreed to meet him at Watto’s shop to finalize the arrangements for the following day. Anakin had then, hesitantly, offered them the use of his home for the evening. Seeing as how it was only for one night, and they’d be leaving after the race, he didn’t see the harm in it. The Jedi Master had agreed, saying that they would be better off sticking together and keeping a low profile until the race the following afternoon.

“Master?”

“I thought I sent you home, boy.” Watto told him with a frown, his wings battling the air in a constant hum.

Anakin swallowed the anger he always felt when Watto called him boy; it was bad enough to be the creature’s slave, but that was the ultimate insult. He managed to find a shrug and an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, Master, I wouldn’t have returned if the outlanders hadn’t approached me.”

“The outlanders? What for?”

Anakin met Watto’s gaze squarely, knowing he appreciated frank speaking. “They want to sponsor me in the Boonta Eve Classic — I told them you would have to approve it before I could say yes or no.”

Watto stroked his flaccid chin, eyeing Anakin carefully, but Qui-Gon stepped into the shop at that moment and Watto turned his attention to the Jedi. “The boy tells me you wanna sponsor him in the race. How can you do this? Not on republic credits, I think.”

Qui-Gon produced a hand-held holo emitter from his robes and flicked the on switch. Anakin’s eyes widened as he took in the hologram of the ship. Qui-Gon’s next words both startled and humbled him, showing him exactly how much faith Qui-Gon put in his abilities. “My ship will be the entry fee. It’s in good order — except for the parts I need.”

“Very nice... Nubian I think.” Watto flew upwards, stroking his chin again, and looking at Qui-Gon curiously. “What will the boy drive? He smashed up my pod last race — will take him long time to fix, I think.”

“Sebulba flashed me with his vents,” Anakin told Qui-Gon in his own self defense. “I saved the pod — mostly.”

“That you did.” Watto’s reluctant praise had Anakin straightening his shoulders. It was rare his master said anything good about him. “The boy is good, I’ll give him that.”

“I’ve acquired a pod in a game of chance. The fastest ever built.” Qui-Gon sent Anakin a glance and a faint half-smile.

“I hope you didn’t kill anyone I know.” Watto told him with a chuckle. Anakin’s eyes narrowed on his master. Watto seemed to be taking this in stride, far more easily than anything Anakin had seen before — except sure thing bets. “Well then, you supply the pod, I supply the boy and we split the winnings fifty-fifty, I think.”

Anakin’s gaze snapped to Qui-Gon’s in alarm but the Jedi Master was obviously no novice when it came to haggling.

“If we’re going to split the winnings, I suggest you front the entry fee. And if we win, you keep all the winnings, minus the parts I need. Either way, you win.”

Watto appeared to consider the deal but Anakin knew, by the way his dangling legs twitched, that the Jedi had offered his Master a deal too good to pass up. Watto made a show of reluctance and then grinned. “Deal.” He slapped the Jedi’s hand in the traditional bargain sealing shake and then Qui-Gon smiled and departed.

Anakin suppressed a whoop. They’d done it! Watto had agreed to let him pilot his own pod racer in the biggest race of the season!

Watto turned to him with a chuckle. “Your friend’s a little foolish, me thinks.”

Anakin managed to keep the disgusted look off his face. “Then why agree with him?”

Watto’s smile revealed most of his rotting teeth. “Because when you lose, his ship is mine. Go; rest.”

Anakin didn’t wait to be told a second time, darting from the hut and back out into the streets. His disgust for Watto swelled in his breast as he stalked away from the junk shop. *Some day*, he promised himself silently. *Some day I’m going to come back here and wipe that cocky grin right off his face!*

“Anakin?”

He stopped, surprised. “Padmé?” He glanced around, looking for her Jedi shadow and frowned when he didn’t see it. “Where’s Qui-Gon?”

“He’s looking over the pod.” A blush, which seemed a permanent adornment around him, tinted her cheeks a light pink. “I wanted to talk to you.”

Anakin resumed his walk, but shortened his steps to match hers as she picked up her pace. “About what?”

“Tomorrow. Is it really as dangerous as you say?”

He shrugged. “More.”

“More?” Padmé stopped, staring at him aghast. “More dangerous?”

Anakin turned to face her, looking left and then right before grabbing her arm and dragging her into a nearby doorway. He darted a look outside before lowering his voice. “I’ll be fine, Padmé. Really. Qui-Gon was right; my reflexes are a Jedi trait.”

“I don’t understand.”

Anakin’s tone turned bitter. “I’ve always had abnormally fast reflexes for a human boy. The year before mom was bought and freed this drifter came in and took an interest in me. He was a Jedi. I thought he’d come to free the slaves; I was wrong.”

“What happened?”

“He talked me into a game of speed and skill that showcased my reflexes. I didn’t realize until too late that he’d arranged for Watto to be watching. When I won, Watto not only took my winnings — which would have bought my freedom, but took the Jedi aside. I was put in a pod the next day.”

“He forced you to race?”

Anakin’s shrug was indifferent as he glanced beyond the small cubby they were in. “The first time, yeah. After that I came to love the thrill and the challenge. Mom used to say I was special, that I was here for a purpose. I used to think that when Cleigg saw mom at one of the races, I had found that purpose. But I was wrong.”

Padmé was silent, digesting the information. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I was meant to help you.”

“You can’t know that.”

He lifted his hand hesitantly, but it fell as he lost his nerve to touch her. He couldn’t — not yet. “I know.” He said instead. “I know it with every fiber of my being that this is why I was introduced to pod racing, that this is the reason I was given my skills. Whatever happens to me on the track after I cross that finish line tomorrow doesn’t matter — it’s getting there that counts.”

“You don’t mean—” She regarded him horrified, grabbing his arm in alarm. “Anakin, it’s not worth killing yourself over!”

His gaze was drawn to her tight grasp of his arm, her fingers flexing as she adjusted her grip. “I always knew pod racing would set me free, Padmé. Death is more welcome than the life I’m currently living.”

“Then come with us.” Her eyes bore into his, earnest in their recommendation. “Bet yourself against your performance, or better yet, against your pod racer. Make it so that Watto has to give you your freedom.”

“It doesn’t work that way and you know it.” He covered her hand with his own, feeling the softness, the smoothness of her skin. The flashes of the future were there, stronger this time, and his hand twitched away. “The pod belongs to Qui-Gon and he’d never bet me against it. He doesn’t like me.”

“That’s not true!”

Anakin smiled faintly. “Ask him yourself, Padmé. Come on; he’s getting worried.”

Padmé pulled back on his arm — the grip she hadn’t relinquished when he turned to go. “Anakin?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you a Jedi?”

“Nope.” He grinned roguishly. “Just able to use what they call the Force is all. Come on.”

She followed him, but her hands remained gripped solidly about his forearm as they did, as if she was worried about losing him, that in the loss of his touch he would disappear. He could have told her not to worry, but she didn’t seem inclined to listen. Anakin wasn’t about to do anything foolish until after they left planet. Once they were safely away and he’d fixed Watto’s pod he could contemplate the best way to go out with a bang — or gain his freedom.

Anakin leaned back against the wall, his eyes on the star-lit heavens. He’d whetted Padmé’s appetite today, given her a glimpse of what and who had made him the way he was. He picked up a handful of the sand, letting them run slowly through his fingers and into the gentle evening breeze. The sand fell, whirling about his hands to disappear into the dark night.

“Lives are like sand, you know.”

Anakin didn’t so much as jump, having expected the Jedi to come looking for him. He opened his hand, letting the last of the grains drift away on the wind. “Coarse, unrefined and meaningless?” Qui-Gon’s chuckle brought Anakin’s gaze down from the sky. “I don’t see how that’s funny.”

“No one’s life is meaningless, Anakin.” Qui-Gon motioned to the low wall where Anakin had chosen to perch. “May I join you?”

“I guess.” Anakin looked out into the night, not wanting to have the Jedi watching him. He felt distinctly uncomfortable with the older man. As a child who’d grown up without a father and the only stable relationship having been with his mother, his comfort level with strangers — especially male strangers — had never been high.

Qui-Gon settled himself on the low wall, watching the young man with curiosity and concern. The silence, long and uncomfortable, stretched between them and Anakin silently willed the older man away. It didn’t work — not that he’d expected it to — but because he sensed the Jedi had something he wanted to talk to him about.

Anakin finally sighed, exasperated. “What?”

“Are you always this talkative?”

Anakin’s expression darkened. “If you don’t like it you can leave, Master Jedi.”

“I didn’t come here to pick a fight, Anakin,” Qui-Gon told him honestly.

Anakin wasn't about to admit that he'd already known that. He simply looked away again. "So? Maybe I don't want your company."

"Then why allow me to stay?"

Why indeed? Anakin struggled internally with the question. He didn't like Jedi, had every reason to distrust them, but something about this Jedi Master instilled confidence, made him *want* to trust him. Or maybe it was just the Jedi aura — but he doubted it. His feelings had never been wrong about people — only the Jedi who had deliberately hid his intentions. He'd been burned once — he wasn't about to be burned again.

"Anakin?"

Anakin met Qui-Gon's gaze unintentionally as he looked back and was immediately caught. The Jedi's gaze was open, honest. He'd lowered his mental shields deliberately, allowing Anakin to feel for himself, to *see* for himself, that Qui-Gon's intentions weren't like those of the Jedi who'd hurt him before. Anakin swallowed hard, tearing his gaze away to drop it to his boots. He felt shocked, like standing too close to an unshielded power coupling; the calmness the Jedi radiated wasn't an act like it'd been with the other he'd met. Qui-Gon was truly at peace with his choices. "I guess a part of me wants you to stay."

He didn't see Qui-Gon's smile, but he could well imagine the tilt in his lips. "May I ask why?"

Anakin shrugged uncomfortably, glancing up and then away. "Maybe 'cause I think you can help me. Maybe because Padmé trusts you so I should too. I don't know. I don't like Jedi."

"So I gathered. Care to explain why?"

"Not really." Anakin's head came up in time to catch Qui-Gon's acceptance of his answer. "I just don't trust Jedi."

"Did one of us do something to hurt you?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Qui-Gon folded his hands into his sleeves, watching the young man with an intent expression. "May I ask you a question?"

"Don't expect an answer."

"I'm rapidly realizing that, Anakin." Qui-Gon replied easily.

"Then you can ask whatever you want."

"How generous. My question is this. Do you judge all species, races, professions and ways of life by your first encounter or do you allow individuals of each to make their own impressions despite your original apathy?"

Anakin jerked as if he'd been struck, the question, the last thing he'd been expecting, blindsiding him like a sucker punch to the gut. *Not fair!* his mind was screaming. *Not fair, the Jedi doesn't play fair!* But, despite his initial reaction, his brain was already processing the

question. Was he that judgmental? Did he truly base his knowledge of a species, race, profession or way of life on a single individual?

Qui-Gon rose from his seated position, not giving Anakin a chance to recover. “You’ve asked us to look beyond your status as a slave to see the person underneath, Anakin. I think it would only be fair for you to give me the same courtesy. Good night.”

Anakin stared after the Jedi Master, shame quickly stealing over him. He was better than that. He knew better than to judge another individual by the trappings they wore, or where they came from. Was it any different condemning a man he knew next to nothing about as being as bad as the only other example of a Jedi he’d ever known? The embarrassment had him speaking up before he was ready. “Master Jinn?”

Qui-Gon stopped inside the doorway, turning to look at Anakin. “Yes?”

Anakin shifted on the wall, dangling his long legs towards the terrace and finding purchase on the rough stone. He lifted his head. “I... I’ve let past prejudices dictate my actions towards you. I’m sorry for that; you’re right. It’s just I have no reason to trust Jedi.”

Qui-Gon smiled. “It takes a brave man to admit to his faults and a wise man to recognize them, Anakin. I think tomorrow we’ll simply have to give you a reason to trust us. Get some sleep; it’s late.”

Anakin shook his head. “You go ahead. I think I’ll stay out here for a few more minutes.”

“Good night, Anakin.”

“Good night, Master Jinn.”

“Anakin.”

“Yes, Master?”

Qui-Gon’s smile was almost gentle. “Call me Qui-Gon.” And then he was gone.

Anakin stared after the Jedi Master, turning the man’s words over in his mind. He’d been called on his prejudice and, while he fully recognized it, he didn’t know if he could move beyond it. The previous Jedi had almost certainly guaranteed his life-time as a slave. Unless the Jedi could free him, evening the score, he’d save his judgment for later.

Chapter 4

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Anakin kept to himself the following morning as Qui-Gon arranged for the animals that would take them to the track. The Pod Racer had been picked up and delivered under Anakin's watchful eye earlier that morning, leaving him with time to kill before the noon starting time. And time to kill, meant thinking about what the Jedi — what *Qui-Gon* — had told him the night before.

His prejudices had never been strong, not until the other Jedi had come. He frowned; staring out across the dunes from the upper balcony of the small slave quarter hovel he called a home. Qui-Gon had been right. He'd been looking at the older man with contempt he didn't deserve because of an action someone else had taken. Because of a direction another of his order had decided to send him on for his life path.

It wasn't fair to Qui-Gon, it wasn't fair to Padmé — who obviously trusted the Jedi with her life — and it wasn't fair to himself. He admitted it silently, though he was sure he wasn't yet ready to reach out and offer the friendship he sensed Qui-Gon wanted. He was, however, willing to give the Jedi the benefit of the doubt.

"You're awful quiet this morning, Anakin."

He smiled faintly, crossing his arms over his chest as he didn't change the direction of his gaze. "I'm usually quiet. Having you here has brought out my talkative side."

Padmé stepped up to stand beside him. "Have you given any thought to coming with us?"

"You don't give up do you?" He slanted a look at her, marveling at how the sun gave her hair the look of burnished copper and cinnamon.

The blush she'd been lacking when she'd first joined him spread quickly across her cheeks. "Where else would you go?"

"I was thinking of joining my mother on Cleigg's moisture farm."

Padmé frowned, turning to look at him squarely. "I don't see you being happy with that kind of lifestyle."

"What do you know about moisture farming?"

She looked away, out across the dunes. "Not much. But it can't be nearly as exciting as racing pods."

"True." Anakin shrugged, hopping up onto the wall and reclining his back against the taller wall partition as he let the outside leg dangle down the drop towards the ground. "But anything's better than being a slave."

"Don't you want to leave Tatooine?"

“And do what?” He looked at her curiously. ‘I can’t be a Jedi — I’m too old. I’d never be any good as a diplomat. Unlike *some* people I know.’ He grinned roguishly and winked at her but she looked away nervously. “I’m too quick to temper. I suppose I could be a mechanic for some high and mighty Senator, or maybe fly ships; they can’t be that much different from pod racing.”

“See, there are lots of things you can do.”

“That’s two, Padmé.”

“Well, yes, but there are other things tied to those you could do.”

“Like what?”

“Controllers for traffic, or Droid repairs — your work with 3P0 is exceptional.” She blushed deeper, unable to meet his gaze.

“Thanks. Not many people can stand 3P0 the way you do.”

“He’s very helpful,” she told him honestly. “I would... that is, the Queen could use someone like him on her staff.”

Anakin eyed her carefully, wondering at her slip up. “I think your Queen had better meet him first. He tests even my patience — and I’m his creator.”

“But he’s wonderful!”

“Then he’s yours.”

She stepped back, shocked. “I couldn’t.”

“Why not? You like him better than I do and even if your... your Queen can’t use him, he’d be useful elsewhere.”

“I couldn’t Anakin, really.”

“You sure? You’d be doing me a favor.”

“I — a favor?”

Anakin sighed, playing to her reluctance. “I’d rather you think of him as a gift, but I have to admit, his chatterbox tendencies get on my nerves. Seeing as how he’s really programmed for etiquette and protocol — I’d intended him to help mom — he seems wasted here. And I might be tempted to one day use him for target practice.”

“No!” Padmé pounced on that, coming so far as to grab Anakin hands as she rushed to his side. “I’ll take him, I’ll—”

Her words were cut off, not because she’d intended to be, but because Anakin no longer heard her. Danger swirled about Padmé. Secrets revealed themselves as her touch conveyed more than she’d intended. Her mission came to him with sudden clarity, the dangers she’d faced and the knowledge that she had more dangers to face yet. Her saw her facing the senate — not as a handmaiden, but as Queen Amidala. He saw her returning to Naboo — and their plot to free her people failing. He saw them enslaved and felt her despair, her—

“Anakin?” Her touch disappeared, her hands moving to his cloth covered shoulders and shaking. “Anakin? Are you alright?”

He almost rolled off the wall so suddenly did the images disappear. He closed his eyes for a heartbeat, taking a deep breath, inhaling the scents of his home planet and knew what he had to do. Somehow, someway, he had to go with them.

He opened his eyes to meet her gaze. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Her brow was wrinkled with concern. “You seemed pretty out of it. Should you be racing today?”

She was close. Close enough he could see the flecks of gold that highlighted her eyes. Her concern for him washed across his senses in soothing waves. He couldn’t tell her about his abilities just yet, not completely, but when she looked at him with those expressive eyes, he felt compelled to explain — at least partially. He managed to find a smile for her through his shock. “I’m fine, Padmé, honest. I just... see things sometimes.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Only if there are other people around.” He looked away. “I never see things this way when I’m racing, though, so you shouldn’t worry.”

“I don’t understand. How can you see things in more than one way?”

Anakin felt his face heat. “It’s hard to explain to someone who can’t. Qui-Gon would be able to explain better than I can.”

“I asked you.”

He sighed, wondering if he shut up and ignored her if she’d go away. He was still turning over what he’d seen in his mind’s eye, still reeling from the shock that Padmé wasn’t just Padmé but the ruler of her people. Still, he doubted ignoring her was smart. She wouldn’t have achieved her position without some kind of tenacity. He answered her question reluctantly without looking at her. “When I’m racing, for example, I don’t let myself think about what’s coming; I simply let my instincts and the Force guide my actions. Kind of like a pre-cognitive reaction time.”

“How is that different from the other?”

He shifted uncomfortably, wondering exactly how much he could reveal without making her uncomfortable. He knew they were alone, utterly alone, so it was safe to speak of her secret but something was holding him back. Something was telling him that, in revealing that he knew her secret, things would change between them. He remained silent, wondering exactly how he could answer her.

“Anakin?”

He looked back to her, unable to think of anything but what he’d just seen to explain it. “I see possible futures. I know why you’re here and who you are, Padmé. I know you’re headed to Coruscant to plead the plight of your people to the Senate. I know that they’ll be unwilling and unable to help you. I know that you won’t take it lying down and you’ll be compelled to return to your home world to try and free your people. I also know you’ll fail.”

She recoiled from him so suddenly and so thoroughly that she stumbled.

"Watch it!" Anakin reached out, grabbing her arm to keep her from falling back down the stairs and into his house. The move brought his legs back around the wall to be plant firmly on the sand covered terrace.

Padmé was pale, all color having drained from her face as she stared at him in shocked silence.

Anakin released her as soon as she was set firmly back on her feet. "Now you know what it is to be me. I'll see you at the track, Padmé." He turned to go, heading for the small courtyard where his podracer had been built. He couldn't bear to see the pity that would creep into the other emotions in her gaze. He couldn't bear to be an object of her pity.

"Anakin."

He stopped, his foot one step down from the top step, and closed his eyes against the pain in her voice. He felt it as if she'd stabbed him in the arm with a fork; agonizingly sharp as it cut to the bone. He didn't say anything, simply waited as he felt her gathering her strength around her like a cloak.

Padmé's voice was steady. "If you know I'll fail, then you know why."

He winced. "You won't like the answer."

"I didn't like the last one."

"You'll think I'm conceited."

"Never." She laughed shakily. "If there's anything I've learned in the last few days, it's that you do as little as possible to draw attention to yourself."

He cleared his throat uncomfortably, fighting back the thrill at her words as he finally turned to look at her. She was composed, but pale. "You're right; I don't like drawing attention to myself."

"But you're going to help us anyway." Her lips tilted slightly. "Why will I fail, Anakin?"

He looked away uncomfortably, ducking his head to stare at his feet. "Because I won't be there to help you."

His head came up as her footsteps came closer and he jerked a little as she stopped in front of him. She caught and held his gaze, searching for something he couldn't name. He was miserable as she did, wondering what she expected to see, and knowing she'd think him egotistical for saying such a thing. But her reaction was the last thing he was expecting.

"I believe you," she told him gently, hesitantly reaching up, only to lose her nerve and let her fingers fall away before ever making contact. "Are you sure I can't convince you to come with us when you know I'll fail without you?"

Anakin stared into the eyes that would haunt him for the rest of his life. "If you can find a way to secure my release from Watto, I will do anything you ask me to, Padmé. I would even be your slave."

She laughed softly. "I'd rather have you as my friend."

Anakin smiled knowingly, managing a roguish grin. “Tell me that in a couple of years and I might just believe you. I need to get to the track; it’s almost time.”

“I’ll come with you.”

He didn’t argue as she fell into step beside him, making their way to the front of the hovel together. As they walked, Anakin pulled a pair of black leather bantha-hide gloves from one pocket and slipped them on. They didn’t touch, Anakin ensuring his hands were busy, but he felt almost hopeful for the first time since the strange Jedi had set him on his path. Padmé believed him, trusted him and was willingly to trust him with the welfare of her people. A warmth spread through him he couldn’t describe as he helped her into the speeder that had been sent to collect them. Taking his seat beside her, he focused on the first task ahead of him — winning the Boonta Eve Classic — before daring to dream of anything more.

Anakin and Padmé arrived at the preparation area to find Qui-Gon and Watto deep in discussion. Anakin paid them no mind, preferring to have as little to do with his Master as possible, and helped Padmé out of the speeder. He felt a twinge of unease, a shiver spreading through his frame and looked around as Padmé’s feet hit the ground.

Sebulba was staring at him. Anakin met the Dug’s gaze for a half second, smiled cockily, and then turned his back on the spiteful little creature. He caught sight of his pod and moved straight for it, completely oblivious to everything around him. C3P0 and Jar Jar were nearby, arguing about who would bear Anakin’s standard out onto the field.

Anakin didn’t give them more than a passing glance and a hard stare at the Gungan. 3P0 always bore his standard; it wasn’t open for negotiation. Turning to his Pod, he ran his hands over the frame and then proceeded to check each of the connections before the engines would be hooked up to the creatures who would haul them out to the field. Padmé was speaking with Qui-Gon about something — he could hear both of their low voices behind him — but he paid them little mind. He was focused now, concentrating on the race ahead and those who were depending on him to win.

The bleating of the animals was loud inside the hangar as they were herded in by their handlers. They were moved into position, one for each engine, and Anakin jumped to help hook his engines to their harnesses. Padmé and the rest of his friends, except for 3P0, disappeared and he assisted his droid with the harness that would help him hold the flag. Anakin grinned proudly as the white and silver symbol fell gracefully from the top to flutter about the droid’s head and shoulder; he’d designed both himself and was as proud of his symbol as he was of his mechanical mascot.

He double checked the cables, ensuring they wouldn’t stain the engines when they pulled taught, and then waited as each of the races was pulled from the hangar. His would be almost last, like normal, in deference to the fact he was the only slave to race. While previously he’d been insulted by the designation — Sebulba got to go out first — this time he used the extra time to check of the controls.

Sebulba would likely be out for blood this time and Anakin was determined that if blood was going to be spilled, it wasn’t going to be his.

The glare off the sand was almost unbearable as Anakin slapped his helmet onto his head and wrapped the lower covering around to protect his neck and lower face. He'd waved to the crowd when announced and then proceeded to ignore the announcer as the other drivers were introduced. He checked the power feeds, using the extra time to ensure the power flow was stable, his power-couplings adjusting for the extra kick the Jedi's power source provided with little trouble.

The crowd roared, announcing the entrance of Jabba the Hutt — the real power on the planet, and Anakin settled himself deeper in the Pod racer's seat, flexing his hands about the controls. The signal would be given shortly, and he took a deep breath to relax. He cleared his mind— harder than usual with the outcome of this race meaning so much to so many — and focused himself inward. He focused on that part of him that *knew* things. That could anticipate with such accuracy and control his movements.

The start signal was given and he rammed the power controls forward to the stocks. The pod lurched forward and died. He swore in huttese, his cheeks heating as he heard the laughter from the crowd. Ignoring them took a supreme amount of will as he checked the power levels again. They'd fluxuated again, sliding downwards in a sudden curve. Anakin slipped the power from one side to the other, balancing the power again and then flicking the transfer switches. He'd have to check later to see why the pod had stuttered.

He slammed the controls forward again and the pod jumped off with a speed that snapped his neck backwards and sent his heart into his throat. His hands moved independently, his mind working furiously as he fought to calculate how long he would need to catch up to the pack. Not just catch up, but out-distance the leaders.

He was unimpeded heading into the first turn, letting the Force guide his movements as he slid around it, so close to the wall he could almost *feel* the pressure of the pod against the stone. He slipped into the next turn just as tightly, shooting through the pitted ground ahead like a bird skimming the water. Focused, undaunted, he threw the pod around like a child's play toy, shaving milliseconds off his time around each obstacle with finesse he'd not demonstrated previously.

The first of the lagging pod racers materialize up ahead and Anakin sent his pod rocking from side to side as he slid in and around them, maneuvering with cool confidence, darting deftly between the cracks in their formation. Several tried to block him, one attempted to ram him. He pulled back abruptly, slowing the pod to an almost-stop, and surprised the other racer enough to force him to send himself into the wall.

Anakin throttled forward again, ignoring the twinge in his gut at the nasty trick; one that had likely cost the other racer his life. But there was no time for twinges of conscience as he threw the pod around the next two opponents, barely avoiding the debris thrown over one of their shoulders that was designed to blow out his engines.

His body shook, his shoulders being wrenched to the side as the engine of one of those pod raced slammed into the side of his racer and caught on the edge. Anakin kept his grip on the power controls, neatly flipping the pod around the next obstacle and feeling the wrenching sensation as the engine of the other racer tore away. The sound of a crash behind him was quickly obliterated by the howl of the wind across his helmet.

His eyes narrowed as he throttled back to take a hairpin turn, using the pod's momentum to swing around a series of snake-like curves before shooting into an underground cavern. He throttled forward again, dodging the stalagmites and stalactites that shot from the ground and hung low to catch him.

His eyes remained focused ahead as they entered Beggar's canyon and the wide open plain between the rocky walls. His pod shot forward like a gundark on speed, darting neatly through the area and into the next series of canyons before the Tusken raiders — who always camped out on the ridges during races — could get a pot shot.

Anakin let himself relax further, feeling the adrenaline pulsing through his veins like a familiar companion, even more familiar than the comforting feeling of the Force that felt like a protective shroud around his pod racer.

He zoomed past the stands, barely noticing them and shot out and back into the twists and turns of the course. He made the trek once more, this time unimpeded, as he was between the front of the pack and the back. The Force urged him on as he began his third and final lap, a sense of urgency he'd never felt before coupled with the knowledge that Sebulba would win if he couldn't catch up.

And then, as if by magic, Sebulba's pod appeared in front of him. Sebulba had two other contenders on his tail. As Anakin watched, letting his hands fly his pod unconsciously, both contenders were smashed to smithereens. One was dead — the debris left by the body of the racer on the floor of the curved canyon and the wall evidence enough — the other simply had his engines destroyed.

Anakin's eyes narrowed, focusing on Sebulba as his pod racer shot past the second wreck and quickly gained on Sebulba's rig. The Dug piloted carefully, ensuring his racer was expertly positioned between the walls of the canyons so not to allow anyone to pass him. Anakin bided his time, throttling back and letting the Dug steal ahead again. Not for fear, but to give himself enough time to react if Sebulba tried any dirty tricks.

And he did. Bits of debris kept Anakin busy as they shot into the twists and turns of the next canyon when Sebulba made his mistake. He took a turn too tightly and Anakin jumped on the opportunity, not caring one iota that they were entering the underground cavern as he did so. He shot level with Sebulba and neatly dipped his pod racer about one of the hanging rock spears before matching level with the other pod as they shot back into daylight.

Sebulba took the opportunity of the small cave exit to slam his engines into Anakin's. Anakin held steady, not sparing the Dug a glance and tried to get his engines to throttle forward. Something caught and hooked as Sebulba's pod slammed into Anakin's a second time, tying the opponents together in the deadliest part of the track.

Laser blasts and old fashioned bullets peppered the area around the pod racers and a line of fire danced its way down Anakin's right shoulder and back before the whipping wind and his situation drove it from his thoughts. He jerked his controls, attempting to dislodge his pod racer as they entered the final turns and sped across the dunes towards the finish line.

Sebulba's pod was heavier, but Anakin was more skilled, as the Dug tried to shove the lighter pod into the canyon walls. The sound of the Dug's curses could be heard over the wail of the engines as they sped across the sand. "You can't win, slave scum!"

Anakin glanced back, his smile feral, and hit the throttle one last time, sending the pod lunging forward. His head snapped back as the line holding Sebulba's pod to his broke and snapped, leaving the Dug to spin off into the sand as Anakin shot forward at full speed. The roar of the crowd was almost deafening as they rose to their feet, cheering, as he sped past the line, marking his final lap around the track. He throttled back quickly, landing the pod in the winner's circle and let out a whoop of excitement as he pulled his helmet free.

He saw shapes running towards him as he hauled himself free of the pod racer's seat. Standing on the nose, he raised his arms to the crowd with an ecstatic shout, punching his helmet in the air.

"Anakin! Anakin! You did it!"

Still running on adrenaline, his smile wide, Anakin spun, dropping off the nose as Padmé ran towards him. She lunged at him, wrapping him in a tight hug, her delighted laughter holding a twinge of relief as she stared up at him with luminescent eyes.

Anakin ducked his head without thinking and claimed her lips in a celebratory kiss — a kiss which seemed like the most natural action in the galaxy.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

The approving roar of the crowd was drowned out by the sudden roar of his blood pounding in his ears. Images flashed before his eyes. The Future. The Past. He still saw her failing in her quest to obtain the Senate's help, but now, he saw her succeed as she returned, with his help, to free her people. He saw the hardships they'd face, but also saw the joys as she accepted him completely — flaws and all.

Let her go. His mind spoke the words sternly, but he couldn't. Not yet.

He's tasted innocent surprise on her lips, felt her stiffen momentarily and then melt, her hands clinging to him in shock. He registered it all in the back of his mind as the images continued and he saw himself in Jedi robes, standing beside her with her belly distended from pregnancy. He saw her, in childbirth, laughing with him between contractions. He saw her cradling a new-born baby. A baby that had his eyes—

Let her go!

This time he obeyed, wrenching his face away from hers and staring at her in shock. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes closed as she gasped for air.

The roar of the crowd returned, drawing him back to reality and he looked up startled. The crowd was chanting, loving every minute of the by-play in the winner's circle and the knowledge that he'd kissed Padmé for the first time in front of thousands of people caused him to release her abruptly and take a step back. She stumbled without his support, reaching out a hand to steady herself on the wing of his racer as her eyes opened in surprise. They were soft brown, the color of melting sweet spread, and he felt something inside him shift and twist almost painfully.

Anakin turned away, raising his hand to the crowd again but the adrenaline that had carried him this far was slipping away, replacing itself with the knowledge he'd gleaned from the Force about his possible future with Padmé. He tried not to think about it — or how good it had felt to kiss Padmé. She was two years his junior and innocent — and she stirred his blood to the boiling point.

She deserved better, no matter what the Force showed him.

When he turned back, Qui-Gon and the Gungan had joined them, Qui-Gon's face carefully neutral though Anakin could feel the disapproval the Master was carefully masking. Jar-Jar slapped his shoulder, making him flinch.

"Yousa done it, Ani!"

Anakin accepted the congratulations as the fans swept from the stands and into the winning circle, hoisting them onto their shoulders and carrying him away. He looked back, catching Padmé's gaze and holding it. She flushed prettily, but didn't look away, testament to

the strength of her character. He tried to convey with his eyes that this victory was for her; he only hoped she understood his message.

Anakin let himself be carried away to celebrate but the winner's celebration was dull and uninteresting. Those racers who'd survived the race proceeded to get roaring drunk on the alcohol available. Anakin found himself leaving the party shortly after being awarded his trophy from Jabba the Hutt. A trophy — and winnings — Watto claimed immediately. He stepped outside, looking into the fading light of the setting suns and sighed, running his hands through his hair and feeling the burning sensation in his shoulder. He'd had enough time to wash up — barely — and swipe the sand from his clothing. The Medics hadn't been able to get close enough to patch him up and, until now, he'd been using the Force to suppress his pain. *Another useful trick for the human racer*, his lips twisted wryly at the thought.

"Youth usually have more stamina."

Anakin didn't so much as flinch. "Good evening, Qui-Gon." He turned towards the sound of the Jedi Master's voice. "Did you get a good price for the pod racer?"

Qui-Gon had his arms crossed over his chest. "Better than fair. You built it well."

Anakin shrugged off the compliment. "It's what I do."

There was a long moment's pause and then, very quietly, Qui-Gon broached the subject Anakin hadn't been able to keep his mind off. "You shouldn't have kissed her."

Oh, he knew that. He knew that very well. He'd been thinking of little else since he'd been foolish enough to give into the elation of his victory. It only made it worse that she'd kissed him back. "I know."

"Then why did you?"

"I wasn't thinking." Anakin's admission was accompanied by a blush. "I got caught up in the thrill of winning and when she hugged me..." He trailed off. He'd been asking himself why he'd let himself get caught off guard and only one answer had presented itself. It had been the *right* thing to do. No matter the consequences. He shuffled his feet, looking away, unable to meet the Jedi Master's penetrating stare.

Qui-Gon chuckled, surprising him. "I'm not angry with you, Anakin."

"Jedi don't get angry."

Qui-Gon inclined his head. "Then I'm not upset with you. I am concerned. Padmé is still young and prone to impulse despite her position."

Anakin wasn't sure if he meant as Queen pretending to be a Handmaiden or as Queen and sent him a cautious look. "She'll outgrow it. She's strong."

"She's also insisting I ask you to come with us."

Anakin went still. "Even after this afternoon?"

"I think it plays a part in her insistence, yes, but that's not the reason she gave me."

"Then why?"

“She believes you can see the future.”

Anakin’s still-gloved hands clenched. “I can, Master Jedi. I see possible futures.”

“Can you control it?”

Anakin shook his head. “I wish I could. She... she touched my hand — my bare hand — yesterday and I saw the possible futures she’s headed towards.”

“And you told her.”

Anakin flinched. “She pressed me to.”

“What did you see?”

Anakin shuddered, still reeling from the earlier visions that he had to think about it. He closed his eyes and called to mind what he’d seen. “I saw failure, Master Jedi.”

“Whose?”

“Hers. Yours. I’ve seen her plead her cause before the Republic and gain no ground. She’ll insist on returning to Naboo — and she’ll be captured. After several months of torture she’ll break and sign the treaty with the Trade Federation and then she’ll be killed.”

“This was the only future you saw?”

Anakin shook his head, feeling the pressure increasing on his chest as he remembered the rest of the visions. His head began to throb and the wound in his shoulder started a counter-tempo as his control slipped a notch. The vision he’d just described had been the most mild, but the most clear. “Not the only one, but the most likely.”

Qui-Gon arched an eyebrow in inquiry.

Anakin shuddered. “The most likely of futures always leave the strongest impression.”

“Is there a way to change it?”

Anakin’s eyes dropped and he stared at the toes of his boots. He didn’t want Qui-Gon to think him arrogant, but there was no avoiding the question. “I have to fight at Naboo.”

The silence that greeted his soft statement was almost painful. But it was better than laughter. Anakin kept his head bowed, waiting for the Jedi Master to speak. Finally, Qui-Gon spoke softly. “Will you let me see for myself?”

Anakin’s head jerked upwards and he stared at him in disbelief. “You want to *what*?”

“Show me what you saw. You have very strong, very innate Force abilities. With direction and patience you’d make an exceptionally strong Jedi.”

“I’m too old.” Anakin’s lips twitched. “Not to mention I don’t know how to share or control the visions — aside from avoiding other people’s touch.”

“I could teach you.”

“Isn’t that against the rules?”

“Call it payment.”

“For what?”

“Your freedom.” Qui-Gon’s smile was slight at Anakin’s shocked look. “I won your contract as a part of my bet with Watto on the pod race today. You’re free — if you share your vision with me.”

“Conditions, Master Jedi?”

Qui-Gon chuckled. “I do as I must, young one. As you will I’m sure. Come. It will be painless; I promise.”

Anakin followed reluctantly, not really believing the Jedi Master, but willing to go along with it for the tempting offer he’d been presented. Freedom. If he had Freedom, he would be able to keep Padmé safe and that, more than anything, was what he felt compelled to do.

Qui-Gon walked Anakin back through the visions step by step, a silent, critical observer as he pulled the images from Anakin’s mind. Anakin kept his mental shields in place around the other visions he’d seen. They were still too new, too strange to even contemplate sharing. Even with Padmé — the prominent player. If she’d talk to him again after today; he hadn’t so much as glimpsed her since he’d kissed her.

Qui-Gon was silent as the images ended, and Anakin stiffly pulled his gloves back on. He didn’t want to even *chance* another vision. Qui-Gon’s control had allowed him to focus on the images he’d previously seen. But it hadn’t been enough to block out the faint, glimmering images which overlaid themselves as Qui-Gon’s future. Images that revealed darkness and death.

There was no way the Jedi Master could have missed it.

But Qui-Gon simply stroked his beard thoughtfully, as if what he’d seen was an every day event, the shocking images of little or no shock value. But Anakin knew otherwise. The Jedi Master’s hand trembled slightly where they’d been steady before. Anakin shifted and winced as his shirt caught on the ragged edges of the wound he had yet to get cleaned.

“Is your shoulder bothering you?”

Anakin blinked. “You’ve seen your own death and all you can ask is if my back hurts?”

“Jedi don’t fear death, Anakin. It’s a part of life.”

“Then you might want to check the tremble, Master Jedi; your hands are shaking.”

And, as swiftly as Anakin mentioned it, Qui-Gon’s hands steadied as if there’s never been a problem. Anakin blinked and Qui-Gon’s faint smile was challenging. “You were saying?”

Anakin opened his mouth but then snapped it shut before answering. He glowered at the Jedi Master and presented his back sulkily. *Stupid Jedi, always pretending they were better than—* He jerked as something cool and soothing connected with the wound on his back.

“This will help the pain and ease the swelling.” Qui-Gon told him as his hands carefully, but confidently, worked the antiseptic around the ragged edges and did his best to avoid skin-on-skin contact. “Sit.”

Anakin complied grudgingly. They'd ended up back at his home and, in deference to his other houseguests, were back on the rear balcony. He sat on the low edge and shifted, allowing the Jedi Master to sit behind him and tend the wound without interference.

"How long have you been able to see the future?"

Anakin shrugged, uncomfortably aware that he couldn't pull away — that he didn't *want* to pull away, from the soothing relief of whatever the Jedi had put on his back. "I've always been able to. It's one of the reasons Mom and I ended up with Watto. I knew as a kid that Watto was the key to Cleigg Lars finding her."

"And your own future?"

Anakin shook his head negatively. "I rarely see my own." He didn't even try to hide the bitterness that laced his tone. "I see snatches when I see other people's futures — like Padmé's — but not enough to know what choices I have to make to get there."

"Or the dangers waiting to see you fail."

Anakin didn't comment since it was obvious.

Qui-Gon was meticulous in cleaning the wound on his back and they remained silent for several minutes as the sting left Anakin's flesh to be replaced by a ache. Qui-Gon finally spoke again. "Did you know that very few Jedi see the future, Anakin?"

"I'm not a Jedi."

"But you didn't know it either." Qui-Gon carefully placed the bacta bandage over the long furrow on Anakin's back. "It's a rare trait to be so gifted."

"It's a curse."

Qui-Gon's did more to indicate his amusement with his comment than any other action the man might have taken. "Sometimes. It's also a responsibility."

"I know my responsibilities, Master Jedi; I don't need *you* pointing them out to me."

"Like the other Jedi did?"

Anakin flinched, shying away from the subject. He wasn't ready to discuss that particular topic just yet. "Let's just say I've had to know. Are you done yet?"

"One more strip. If that bullet had hit any higher we'd still be picking up the pieces."

"I'd say I'm lucky, but I heard somewhere that Jedi don't believe in luck."

Qui-Gon's chuckle surprised him. "Most Jedi don't. But I believe that we make our own luck. My Padawan would disagree with me."

"Your... Padawan?"

"My apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You remind me of him."

Anakin wasn't sure if the Jedi Master was trying to insult him or flatter him — though the way he said it, it seemed like the latter. "Is that a good or a bad thing?"

“A good thing.” Qui-Gon’s assurance was easy. “Obi-Wan has a habit of being skeptical of everything and everyone.”

“Even you?”

“You’ll learn, Anakin, that Padawan’s trust their Masters but not implicitly. When you meet Obi-Wan, you’ll see—”

“Wait, wait, when?”

Qui-Gon finished applying the bandage and sat back as Anakin shrugged the torn shirt back onto his shoulder. “You did say you wanted to protect the Queen.”

Anakin’s flush started from his neck and crawled slowly over his face. He hadn’t said anything of the sort — though he’d certainly felt it. He didn’t look at the Jedi Master, instead looking beyond to the dunes outside the city. “Your Padawan won’t like me.”

“Obi-Wan will make his own judgment — providing you do him the courtesy of not prejudging him before you meet him.”

Ouch. Anakin managed not to flinch. “I don’t know anything about him.”

“Except that he’s a Jedi in training,” Qui-Gon pointed out as he rose to his feet, collecting the bandages and blood-soaked pads he’d used to clean Anakin’s back. “Which was enough for you to judge me once you figured out who I was.”

“I said I was wrong, Master Jedi. Give me some credit.”

“And a friendly warning, nothing more. Good night, Anakin.”

Anakin couldn’t respond as Qui-Gon departed. He wasn’t in for a good night; he was in for a long night. A night of sleeplessness and thought which wouldn’t likely help. He sighed, dropping his chin to his chest as he stared blankly down over the side of the hutt.

Everything had been so much easier before the Jedi and Padmé had entered Watto’s shop. Easier, but now he had his freedom and it wasn’t something he was willing to give up to anyone for any reason — especially the Jedi.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Anakin didn't see Padmé the following morning as she, Qui-Gon and Jar Jar went shopping for the supplies they were going to need. Left alone to his own devices, Anakin puttered around his house, cleaning things up, tidying the place and packing the single bag he owned with clothing and extra shoes. He didn't know if the Jedi or Padmé would want him to come along to Coruscant, but if they did, he was going to be ready.

Even if they didn't, he was going to swallow his pride and ask, beg even, to go along. He had to. He couldn't let his vision come to pass, couldn't let Padmé — beautiful, passionate Padmé — plead the case of her people only to be executed for trying to save them. He couldn't, wouldn't let that happen.

A transport came by once, to pick up C3P0, and was accompanied by two young women and a young man who produced credentials identifying them as attaches to the Nabooian Royal house. Padmé's people. Anakin helped them put 3P0 into the transport, grinning as he did because the droid was torn between being 'excited' about the prospect of being able to fulfill his etiquette and protocol functions in such an official capacity — or staying with his maker and assisting his every day living.

Anakin had finally ordered the droid to go or risk becoming spare parts. The transport had left within minutes, drowning out 3P0's chatter. Anakin was surprised to find an ache in his chest and throat, as if he were giving up a part of himself to some unknown. And, in a fashion, he supposed he was.

Qui-Gon appeared on his own at around mid-day, his face impassive. "Anakin."

He took a deep breath. "Yes, Qui-Gon?"

"Are you ready?"

"Ready?"

"You're coming with us, are you not?"

"I wasn't invited, Master Jedi." Anakin told him honestly, feeling his spirits soar and his heart start to pound furiously. "I simply assumed you would leave without me."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "You're a horrible liar, Anakin. Grab your things and let's make haste; we can't afford a long wait after the last few days. We've already lost precious time."

Anakin ducked back into his home and grabbed his bag. He stopped after a moment and looked around. This had been the only real home he'd ever know. The only real place he'd ever called his own. His lips kicked into a grin. He was free now, slave to no man, and could *choose* where he would next call home.

He shut off the lights and stepped outside, closing the door behind him. Watto would acquire some new slave and the Hutt — belonging in truth to Watto — would go to that

individual. Anakin didn't let himself dwell on that fact — everything of value he owned was already tucked in his bag — which wasn't much.

Anakin fell into step with the Jedi Master, not looking back as they crossed through the streets of Mos Espa and around the hovels and stores he'd known since childhood. He paused only once; to say goodbye to Jira. The old woman hugged him with surprising strength and told him he was destined for greatness before patting his cheek and wishing him luck.

Anakin squeezed her hands, wished her well, and departed with Qui-Gon, conscious the whole time of the darkness, the vacant emptiness that he'd seen as Jira's future. She wouldn't last the month.

"She's lived a long time."

Anakin jerked at Qui-Gon's level observation, one made just as they were passing beyond the city's outskirts. "What?"

"Jira." The Jedi clarified. "She's an old woman, much older than I am. Her life has been tough but good. You should not mourn those who have served their purpose, Anakin. Jira is tired, she will likely welcome death."

Anakin flinched. "Old or not, she deserves the choice."

Qui-Gon placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder and squeezed. "It *will* be her choice, and we must respect it."

Anakin said nothing as Qui-Gon moved away at a faster clip. He matched the Jedi's speed, staying side-by-side as they crossed between dunes and around obstacles. Suddenly, a flash of something out of the corner of his eye drew his attention and, just as quickly, he was pushed to the ground.

The sound of lightsabers igniting was as loud as the sudden clash of energy meeting energy. "Anakin, tell them to take off!"

Anakin rolled away and to his feet, glancing back over his shoulder. The image imprinted itself in his mind and, as if ice water had been poured through his veins, he shivered violently, almost tripping as he stumbled up the ramp.

The face Qui-Gon fought was one of nightmares. But in particular, Qui-Gon's own nightmare. It was the face of the man who would eventually kill him.

Anakin pushed the thought aside, yelling for the pilot to take off at the Jedi Master's orders. The cruiser rose above the ground, flying near the battling sabers as Anakin watched, fascinated. Qui-Gon moved like water, fluid and graceful in his parries and counter attacks.

The ferocious visage of his enemy was curled in a sneer as he parried the blows of the Jedi Master with arrogance and power. Qui-Gon judged the angle of the ship and, to Anakin's amazement, jumped straight up to land on the still-extended ramp. Anakin put his hand out to help Qui-Gon, who grasped the hand with a firm grip to pull himself forward. As the ramp closed, the hiss of the seal telling of the pressure equalization, Qui-Gon collapsed back, turning off his lightsaber and gasping for breath.

A young man, several years older than Anakin, but younger than Qui-Gon, rushed into the bay and Anakin hung back as they spoke, studying the new arrival with a critical eye. Finally

Qui-Gon turned and motioned to the other young man. “Anakin Skywalker, meet Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Anakin met the other young man’s gaze and held it, but didn’t offer his hand. Obi-Wan did, forcing Anakin to grasp it and silently thank his good sense that he’d left his gloves on. “You’re Obi-Wan Kenobi?”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “I see my Master’s been telling stories about me again. Nice to meet you, Anakin.”

Anakin smiled, unable to resist at the good humor in the other man’s voice and nodded. “Likewise, I think. I guess I expected someone...”

“Older?”

Anakin’s grin turned sheepish. “Younger.”

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon enjoyed a good laugh, one that Anakin couldn’t help but join in on, as his view of the Master/Padawan relationship was thoroughly pulverized. Vowing to make no more assumptions, he helped Obi-Wan pull Qui-Gon to his feet and then, to his chagrin, was drafted into finishing the connections for the hyper drive he’d won for their ship.

Space was cold.

Anakin shivered as he struggled to stay warm on the ship. He stamped his feet, rubbing his arms as he paced back and forth across the main recreation and eating room. He couldn’t find enough warmth; couldn’t produce enough friction to keep himself warm for any length of time and had finally resulted in pacing to try and keep his blood flowing.

He was starting to question the logic of allowing people he barely knew to spirit him away from where he’d been born.

“Cold?”

He spun at the sound of *her* voice and nodded, keeping his jaw clenched shut before the chattering of his teeth gave him away. He didn’t deny it though — he was certain his blue tinted skin would have given him away if he’d tried.

Padmé managed a smile and began unfolding a blanket she’d brought. “I thought you might be. Your planet’s a little warm for my taste, Anakin, but—”

“I’m sorry I kissed you.”

Heat flooded her cheeks and she dropped her gaze as she offered him the blanket. “Why... why did you?”

Anakin felt his own cheeks heat as he accepted the blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. He settled onto the bench along one wall and brought his feet up before him so he could curl up in the warmth. He couldn’t look at her. “I... It felt like the thing to do.”

“I see.”

He could hear that she didn't. "No you don't. I wanted to kiss you, Padmé, I just didn't have the nerve."

"And thousands of screaming fans gave you the nerve?"

Ouch. Anakin ducked his head. "Uh. No."

"Then what?"

"I wasn't thinking. At all. I just acted on the impulse. I'm sorry if you were embarrassed."

She was silent for a long minute. "I wasn't embarrassed."

He peeked up at her. "You weren't?"

Padmé settled on the bench by where he'd tucked the blanket around the toes of his boots. "No. I was shocked. And then you wouldn't even talk to me the next day!"

He blushed. "I didn't want you to yell at me."

"Are you really sorry you... you kissed me, Anakin?"

He had to see her, had to gauge her reaction, and was startled to find she was searching his face with something akin to fear in her eyes. He answered softly, honestly, knowing he couldn't lie when that fear might expand into hate. "No. I'll never be sorry, Padmé. Never."

Her smile was worth it.

Awkwardness descended a moment later and Padmé rose to her feet. "I should be going."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

He nodded to the blanket that now encompassed him completely, locking him in a cocoon of warmth. "The blanket. I thought I was going to freeze to death."

She chuckled. "Hot worlds breed thin blood. You'll get used to it."

"Only if my angel keeps looking out for me."

She blushed prettily. "You shouldn't say things like that."

Her protest sounded half-hearted. Anakin shifted and lifted one hand from the warmth of the blanket. "Here."

She frowned, making no move towards him.

"I made you something." He told her, a small pendant dangling from a leather chord in his bare fingers. He'd taken off his gloves when he'd realized their material was making him colder. "It's to bring you good fortune."

"I thought Jedi didn't believe in luck."

"I'm not a Jedi."

She moved back towards him and gently took the pendant, careful not to touch skin against skin. "This is beautiful, Anakin."

“Just like you.”

She blushed again so he pointed out the features of the pendant. “It’s a piece of *Japor*, something that’s very rare according to my mother. I rubbed grease in the wood and let it soak in one of mom’s dyes for about a week. That’s what the shine is.”

“And the symbol?”

It was his turn to blush. “It’s mine — the same one that I put on my flag and racer. I thought, maybe, this way you wouldn’t forget me.”

She almost dropped it; he saw her fighting the urge, before her fingers curled possessively over the pendant. “Thank you, Anakin. But I don’t need this to remember you by.”

He sighed, tucking his hand back under the blanket and leaning his head against the wall. “Things are going to change when we reach Coruscant, Padmé. Master Qui-Gon told me he wants me to speak with the Jedi Council. I know they won’t agree to train me, but he thinks they need to know about my talents.”

“They might think you’re too much of a threat *not* to train,” she told him with a small smile. “You know that I won’t have as much time for you once we reach Coruscant, right Anakin?”

“I know.” He managed not to let how much that hurt show. “I’d still like to see you though. Who knows, maybe you’ll be able to convince the republic to resolve the issue and not have to fight for the freedom of your people.”

“You said it yourself that it won’t happen.” She sighed. “I wonder if that’s the case, then why we don’t just turn right around and start the movement to free Naboo instead of waste my time with the Senate.”

Anakin sat upright so quickly she jumped. He knew his alarm was written all over his face but he couldn’t help it. “You can’t do that!”

“Why not? Wouldn’t it save more lives?”

He grimaced. “In the short term, maybe. But at least with the Republic aware of the plight of Naboo, the Trade Federation can’t move in more resources. If you turn back now, they can act unimpeded and unopposed. Before you knew it, you’d have twice or three times as many enemies to fight and no one to watch your back.”

“But you said the republic won’t help.”

“Not in the way you want,” he conceded. “But at least you’ll be opening their eyes to the problem. You’ll save other worlds the same fate.”

“And you’ll save those ones as well?”

He flushed, feeling as if she’d slapped him and looked away.

Her hand came to rest on his knee. “I’m sorry, Anakin. That wasn’t fair. It’s just... my people are dying and if we can’t do something quickly we might not be able to do anything at all.”

“You can always do something, Padmé. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to try and sleep.”

She rose, dismissed, and paused. “Good night, Anakin.”

“Good night Padmé.”

Anakin closed his eyes, feeling the stinging sensation behind his eyes that denoted tears and fought not to let them fall. He was about to lose his only friend and risked resentment simply because he could do more to help save her world than anyone else. He turned his head to the wall, silently wishing there were some other way, something he’d overlooked, something that would break down the resentment that was starting to wind its way into Padmé’s relationship with him.

And he knew there was nothing. Not a thing he could do to prevent it. Until her people were free she would resent him for not having warned her of the invasion — despite the circumstances of their meeting. She would blame him because she had no one else to blame.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

“Qui-Gon tells me you’re the owner of that incredibly high midichlorien count he sent me.”

“What?”

Obi-Wan lounged on the doorframe, watching Anakin with a surprisingly astute gaze. “Midichloriens. They’re little creatures in your blood that let you feel and use the Force.”

“Know anyone who can kill them?”

Obi-Wan arched his eyebrows. “Not to appreciative of your gifts, are you.”

Anakin shrugged, pushing himself up into a sitting position and yawning. He scratched his head and then planted his still-booted feet on the ground. The blanket shifted but he didn’t lose it completely. He suppressed a groan as the tingling in his legs and feet — and numbness in his backside — protested the cramped sleeping position. He gasped as he tried to wiggle his toes and pain shot through his legs.

“You’d have been more comfortable in your bunk.”

Anakin shot the Jedi a sour look. “I’d have frozen to death in my bunk. This ship is colder than the worst night in the desert.” Obi-Wan’s chuckle did nothing to improve his mood. “Laughing at other’s expense isn’t a good quality for a Jedi.”

“An expert on Jedi, are you?” Obi-Wan grinned. “Qui-Gon tells me you’re not very fond of Jedi.”

“Qui-Gon?” Echoed Anakin surprised.

“My Master doesn’t expect me to be respectful all the time. Besides, he couldn’t very well ask you to call him by his given name and not expect me to.”

Anakin had to give him that. He latched onto the last of what Obi-Wan had said, challenging the younger man. “I don’t appreciate being talked about behind my back.”

“Nothing very secretive,” Obi-Wan told him with a funny half-smile. “Though he did think I should try and change your opinion on Jedi.”

“You and what army?”

“I see I’m going to like you.”

Anakin threw him a disgusted look. “You like contrary people?”

“I like the challenge they present,” Obi-Wan corrected, straightening himself as Anakin used the table to stand. “It hones the skills I come by naturally.”

Anakin managed not to wince as the pins and needles raced painfully down his slowly awakening limbs. "Tact and modesty obviously aren't what you're talking about."

Obi-Wan's chuckle wasn't the reaction Anakin was looking for. "My Master believes I'm of better use at the negotiating table. Hence, he encourages me to use my diplomatic skills whenever and wherever necessary."

"So I'm what — your next assignment?"

"I'd prefer to be your friend."

"I don't have many friends." Anakin stood straighter as the feeling returned to his legs and he didn't feel like he was going to collapse. He retrieved the blanket and folded it neatly and then scooped his gloves from the bench. "Most people stay away from me."

"Most people don't know what it's like to use the Force."

Anakin shot him a wry look. "Most people can't accept someone who wears gloves all the time. People, at least people on Tatooine, have problems accepting someone who shys away from personal contact."

"Then why the gloves?"

Anakin pulled them on with practiced movements, turning to meet Obi-Wan's gaze. "Would you want to see the future of every person you shook hands with?"

Obi-Wan's silence was enough of an answer for Anakin. He pulled his sleeves down to cover his wrists. "So how long have you been an apprentice?"

"Long enough."

Anakin chuckled at the dry tone in Obi-Wan's voice. "That long, huh?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I didn't think I'd be chosen for a long time. I thought I'd be stuck in some backwater outpost as a part of the Agri-corp."

"Agri-corp?"

"One of several divisions un-chosen Padawans are sent to after their 13th year. I have a.. knack, you might say, for helping things grow."

"A..." what had his mother called it? Oh, right. "A green thumb?"

Obi-Wan held up his hands for inspection, his lips twitching. "I should hope not!"

They shared a laugh and Anakin stretched, reaching out to touch the roof of the room with his finger tips. "So how'd you end up with Qui-Gon as your Master?"

"The same way all Padawans end up chosen. The Master selects their own."

Anakin blinked. "Do you mean to tell me they just line you up and pick you based on size or something?"

"Or something." Obi-Wan shrugged. "Most Masters are prompted by the Force to select their Padawans. Or, in the absence of strong feeling, the Padawans background or abilities. Master Qui-Gon is honing my diplomatic skills in a fashion few other Masters could."

"I thought Jedi were mediators."

"Partly," Obi-Wan conceded. "Shall we sit to have our chat?"

"Go ahead. I think I'll stretch. I still can't feel everything yet."

"Serves you right for picking the most uncomfortable corner of the mess hall," Obi-Wan teased. "You could have always taken your blanket back to your bunk."

Anakin colored slightly. "I meant to, but..."

Obi-Wan's smile was knowing but he changed the subject effortlessly. "Why do you think all Jedi are mediators?"

Anakin glanced towards the open hallway and shrugged uncomfortably. "In my experience they have been. Some more devious than others."

"This strange Jedi you told my Master of?"

Anakin nodded, not looking at Obi-Wan. "Your Master has proven himself to be a mediator as well."

"I should hope so!"

Anakin examined Obi-Wan as the other man laughed, seemingly out of proportion with the context. He felt a flare of indignation but tramped it down, somehow knowing that Obi-Wan wasn't laughing *at* him but something else... "I sense a hidden joke."

Obi-Wan coughed, continuing to chuckle. "Our mission that landed us on Tatooine was mediation."

Anakin grinned sheepishly. "I suppose I should have guessed that, huh?"

"Why would you?"

"Qui-Gon is a very diplomatic person."

"Usually." Obi-Wan conceded, unable to wipe the grin from his face as his eyes still danced with mirth. "My Master is very well traveled. He knows how to read the feelings of those around him and gauge what concessions can and can't be possible."

"Are Jedi supposed to do that?"

"Mediators are. Most Jedi have the capacity to some degree, but it takes someone who is able to look beyond the surface tensions to truly mediate a conflict successfully."

"You sound like you know what you're talking about."

Obi-Wan waved away the compliment. "I have been studying Qui-Gon's techniques for many years and I hope to improve upon them."

"And he will."

They turned to find Qui-Gon standing in the doorway, his arms crossed casually over his chest; the posture Obi-Wan had unconsciously copied earlier. "I'm glad to see the two of you have gotten off on the right foot."

Anakin didn't misinterpret the knowing look Qui-Gon shot his way and he inclined his head fractionally, accepting the veiled compliment for what it was. He'd tried very hard not to pre-judge Obi-Wan and had been rewarded. The younger Jedi seemed willing, even eager, for a friend closer to his age. "Obi-Wan was just telling me about your mediation tactics."

"So I hear." Qui-Gon looked at his apprentice with a slight smile. "Obi-Wan, however, is a far better mediator than I have ever been."

Anakin was amused to see the younger Jedi color slightly and duck his head in humility. "Then why is he still your apprentice?"

Qui-Gon chuckled. "That, Anakin, is a very good question. Obi-Wan, why are you still my apprentice?"

"I have much to learn from you yet, Master."

Qui-Gon arched an eyebrow. "A topic for the Council Chamber, I think." He turned his attention to Anakin. "Have you thought about what you'll do when you reach Coruscant?"

He shrugged. "Stay near Padmé, if I can."

"And if you can't?"

Anakin paused and then shrugged again. "I haven't really thought that far. I figured since I'll need to be around when she heads back to Naboo, I shouldn't stray too far."

Obi-Wan blinked. "Heads back to Naboo? But the Queen hasn't spoken to the senate yet."

Anakin shared a look with Qui-Gon before turning apprehensively back to Obi-Wan. "Remember what I said about seeing futures?"

"Yes."

Anakin managed a faint smile that did nothing to quell the sudden nervous jumping of his stomach as he waved for Obi-Wan to sit back down and launched into an explanation.

"But how do you *know* this particular future will come to pass?"

Anakin continued to pace slowly back and forth across the room as Obi-Wan asked his first question. He felt restless, almost trapped by the circumstance. He couldn't have *not* answered or offered an explanation, but how did he explain what he simply knew to be true?

Anakin was saved from answer when Qui-Gon did it for him. "If the Senate rejects the Queen's motion, she will set in motion events that will lead to her eventual return."

Obi-Wan frowned, obviously thinking it through. "And if they accept?"

"They won't." Anakin's voice was soft, but full of conviction. 'If they did, they'd have to acknowledge the corruption that's spreading through the Senators at an alarming rate and not just from the Trade Federation.' He smiled faintly. "The Senate's cooperation wasn't in *any* of the possible futures I saw."

"But how do you know that one is the one that will happen?"

Anakin flinched. “The strongest images are usually the most likely. That one was surprisingly strong.”

“But — you haven’t even met the Queen yet, how can you know what actions she’ll-...” Obi-Wan trailed off. “A decoy. I’ve been protecting a decoy, haven’t I?”

“You’re a wise man, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon told him with a smile. “The Queen felt it necessary, but Anakin’s surprising abilities made it impossible for her to hide from him. We have to prepare, for we’ll be going back to Naboo with her.”

“We will?” Obi-Wan’s echo was incredulous. “What about Anakin?”

“I have to go.”

“Why? Wouldn’t you be safer on Coruscant?”

“I might be,” Anakin conceded, shifting in place before continuing to pace. “But *she* wouldn’t be.”

“The Queen?”

Anakin nodded, not wanting to have to tell Obi-Wan what others would have called arrogance. Despite Qui-Gon’s acceptance of the matter and Obi-Wan easy, open acceptance of him as a tag-along, he didn’t know if the younger Jedi would think him arrogant or simply delusional. He didn’t dare hope he’d be believed.

The silence stretched through the room uncomfortably and Anakin could feel Qui-Gon’s gaze on him, waiting silently. Adhering to his decision. A decision which was bound to be challenged. A challenge Anakin wasn’t sure he would be able to avoid or deflect. He would likely have to tell Obi-Wan and then watch as he was either laughed at or discounted as a fraud. He swallowed hard, unable to look at either Jedi, his hands clenching into fists.

“Why do I feel I’m being left out of something momentous?” Obi-Wan suddenly asked, looking from Anakin to his Master and back. “Why is it so important that you go back to Naboo with us? What’s going to happen if you don’t?”

Anakin swallowed the lump in his throat, took a deep breath and stopped so he was looking directly at Obi-Wan, his gaze steady. “If I don’t go with you and do as I must, the Trade Federation will occupy Naboo, capture the Queen, despite both of your efforts and kill you — both of you. They’ll torture the Queen for several months, force her to sign the treaty and eventually execute her.” His voice shook as he fought to keep it level, to impart to Obi-Wan the very real consequences of his absence. “Thousands, possibly millions of innocent people will be forced to slave for the Trade Federation. They’ll be forced to help strip their planet of its natural resources all to increase the profit margins of the Trade Federation.”

Obi-Wan was silent, his gaze serious as he contemplated Anakin’s words. Finally he spoke, his tone low. “And why are you so important?”

Anakin flinched. “If I fight for Naboo, I’ll be given the opportunity to take out the droid control ship.”

“Can’t the Nabooian pilots do that?”

Anakin cracked the barest of smiles. “None of them have Jedi-like reflexes or intuition to guide them. If that ship remains in orbit, the whole plan fails and Pad—” he stopped, pausing to collect himself and take a deep, steadying breath. “I have to go.”

Obi-Wan was quiet for a long minute and Qui-Gon spoke into the silence. “He speaks the truth, Obi-Wan.”

“You’ve seen it, Master?”

“I’ve seen it. Anakin’s presence on Naboo is vital to their liberation. We will do what we must to ensure he remains with us to fulfill his destiny.”

Obi-Wan still looked skeptical, but Anakin breathed easier after a long moment. He didn’t *like* playing the hero, he didn’t *want* to play hero, but he was *going* to play hero. He would be the hero for Naboo because if he didn’t, Padmé would die. And he wasn’t about to let that happen.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Anakin spent the better part of the next day in the cockpit of the Nabooian Cruiser with the pilots and co-pilots. He quizzed them, almost expertly, on the handling specs. Of the cruiser, so much so that the pilot offered him the main seat for the final approach into Coruscant. The pilot was in the co-pilot's seat, in case of emergency, and Anakin felt good to have his hands at the controls of a ship — no matter how bulky. The feeling was settling, calming, as if he were once again in control. His actions on the controls were smoothed, long practiced from years in the bucket seat of a pod racer, and he had no problems adapting to the relatively simply controls of the cruiser.

It was a joy to fly again.

Padmé, the handmaidens and the rest of the Nabooian court were ensconced in the belly of the ship, strapped in for the landing, one they didn't know he would be making. The Jedi were with them, speaking with the Queen about the meetings and security precautions they would have to take.

Anakin let it all flow away, drain out like exhaust from a ship's engines, and left it behind him, concentrating on the power at his finger tips and the *control* yielded to him. If he'd chosen to alter course they wouldn't have been able to react fast enough to immediately counter. There was something almost heady in the knowledge; but he wouldn't veer off course. He stayed the course that was given him, approaching the floating landing pad with a finesse that was a product of his many hours in the cockpit of a racer. The ship set down with the barest of thumps and Anakin set in motion the spin down cycle.

"Nice job, Anakin," the pilot commented with a warm smile and a nod. "You can fly with us any time."

"I just might take you up on that, Captain," Anakin assured him in return as he finished keying in the shut down sequence. He unbuckled the crash webbing and levered himself out of the seat, "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm supposed to debark with the Queen's party."

The pilot waved him away and Anakin crossed quickly through the corridors to where the Queen's party was only now emerging from the room, the Jedi already waiting near the edge of the ramp that had just hit the ground. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon descended first, Qui-Gon catching Anakin's gaze and, nodding to the back of the line, indicated where Anakin was to place himself.

The Queen's entourage and security personnel filed by and Anakin slipped in with the last Handmaiden, pleasantly surprised to find it was Padmé. She unexpectedly grasped his fingers and squeezed for a couple moments before letting them go.

Anakin, surprised, almost stumbled down the ramp and barely caught himself. He flushed, feeling the gaze of the Jedi drawn to him, and ducked his head. He felt gawky and ungainly; awkward among so many graceful people. Padmé's hand came out and covered his. She

stepped close, keeping a hold of his gloved hand, her sleeve covering their entwined fingers. She squeezed again, reassuringly, and Anakin squeezed back, latching onto her hand like a life-line.

When the Queen was greeted by the delegates awaiting them, he felt Padmé tense, and listen to whatever was being said. He shifted fractionally closer but couldn't concentrate on what everyone was talking about. Something about going to see the Senate. He looked to Qui-Gon, who had stepped aside with Obi-Wan and received a short hand motion that indicated he was to go with the Queen and her entourage. Grateful he didn't have to relinquish Padmé's reassuring hold — and that no one appeared to have noted it at all — he willingly followed to the awaiting speeder. Here, he was forced to give up her hand when she let go of his, and was then placed in the front seat of the air speeder. His unease disappeared as he examined the controls with interest.

The flight was uneventful and the Jedi were no where in sight. Anakin relaxed, letting himself absorb the sights and sounds of this city-planet, unable to believe the height of the building or the sheer volume of sentient beings. He hadn't been raised in an area with a lot of privacy, but the atmosphere of Coruscant was almost oppressive and smothering as he inhaled. He smelled corruption and decay, but also hope and rebirth. It was a mixture of emotions, sights and smells that all contained Force echoes he couldn't filter. His head began to ache as, even without the benefit of touch; the awareness and emotions of so many unshielded beings seeped into his head.

“Anakin?”

He fought to keep the emotional barrage out, to maintain his focus, but the pounding was almost physical. So much so that he didn't hear Padmé's concerned question.

Her hand came to rest on his shoulder, shaking slightly. “Anakin? Are you alright?”

He gripped her hand in a tight fist, squeezing it as he focused on her touch and her words. The emotional whirlwind abated for the moment, allowing him a chance to breathe easier. He managed a nod, glancing back at her as he reluctantly released her hand. “There are just so many people!”

She laughed; smiling at him so her eyes twinkled. “There are, aren't there?”

He shrugged, unable to make her understand, and simply tried to relax and enjoy the ride. When the emotional storm began to begin once more, the vortex of human and alien emotion threatening to drown him, he latched on to her presence, turning to ask her inane questions about the planet and, while feeling a little foolish for looking as out of place as he felt, was grateful she seemed to see he needed her to talk to him. She didn't ignore him like he'd feared, which brought back the hope that she wouldn't ignore him when this was over.

They were let off on the outside patio of one of the tallest building Anakin had ever seen. It rose above several of its sisters and, curious, he stepped to the edge of the pad and looked straight down. Awe was the first emotion to sweep through him.

The sky lanes stretched deep enough he couldn't see the ground, the building so high it was lost in the clouds. The skyscrapers around him were similar, each disappearing into a fluffy surface of white. The sunshine reflected off the windows of the skyscrapers, shining back towards each other dozens of times over to create an almost rainbow like effect.

“Anakin!” He was jerked back from the edge by a startled Padmé. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

He grinned, unable to withhold the wonder. “Amazing! Does everyone here live in these huge houses?”

Padmé looked at him curiously. “You weren’t scared?”

He blinked, puzzled. “Should I be?”

She sighed, exasperation clear in the action as she pulled him back towards the entranceway. “There are thousands of feet between you and the ground. If you fall, there’s no chance you’ll survive.”

He shrugged and cracked a smile. “Something would break my fall before then.”

She didn’t appear to believe him as they stopped inside the doors. The guards were left outside, the handmaidens were already fussing about Sabé; Padmé’s decoy who was still dressed as the Queen.

Padmé turned to him, her back to her handmaidens. “I have to get changed for the emergency Senate session, will you be alright here?”

He searched her gaze. He saw caution; wariness, as if she didn’t know to trust him or didn’t *want* to trust him. He also saw confusion. But not confusion for what she was doing, but because of him. He smiled, reaching up to gently brush his leather-covered thumb over her cheek. “Don’t worry about me, Padmé. I’ll be fine. While you’re talking to the Senate, I’ll be meeting with the Jedi Council and explaining this whole mess.”

She caught his hand, pressing it to her face for a brief moment. Her gaze stayed connected to his and he felt her sway towards him in mute appeal. Her gaze was full of longing just as it was full of conflict. She was fighting herself and losing because he could read it in her eyes.

She wanted him to kiss her and she didn’t know if it was a good idea.

He glanced behind her to where the handmaidens were pointedly looking elsewhere, deliberately giving them the illusion of privacy. He looked back down to Padmé, torn between wanting to kiss her and wanting to avoid seeing a shift in their futures. He felt drawn to her, pulled by an invisible cord. His head moved downward with agonizing slowness. Her eyes closed, her lips parting on a soft gasp and he froze, just shy of making contact.

He still held her face cupped in one captive palm and he could feel her trembling. But it was more than that. He could feel the skip in her heart beat, the way her breath caught as it feathered across his lips. He could see the acceptance in her features and the rebellion. She wanted his kiss, but she didn’t *want* to want his kiss.

“Anakin?”

“Don’t hate me.” His words were soft, pleading, and his lips touched hers for the barest of moments. A jolt like an electrical shock raced through him even as he pulled back, the contact too brief, to fleeting to allow for a vision. “I’ll wait outside. Good Luck, Padmé.”

Her eyes opened and he averted his gaze as he caught sight of the hurt she couldn’t immediately hide. “Good Luck, Anakin.”

Anakin stepped back outside the suite and into the presence of the guards. He found a bench down the corridor a ways and sat, hanging his head as the image of her brown eyes filled with pain stayed with him. He didn't mean to hurt her, but he couldn't risk distracting her at this junction on her venture. Only once the fight on Naboo had been won and the Trade Federation vanquished could they risk distraction.

His lips twisted in a bitter half-smile.

Nothing was ever easy.

Qui-Gon found him sitting in his dejected and exhausted position almost an hour later. "Things didn't go well with the Queen?"

Anakin lifted his head. "I can't risk distracting her from her objective. If I do, it could change the future I've seen."

"Unlikely." Qui-Gon motioned for Anakin to walk with him and Anakin rose, reluctantly falling into step. "The future you've seen is precipitated by several key events. Some of those events have already happened, the biggest of which is Padmé making it safely to Coruscant. She is here and her audience with the Senate is an assured fact."

"What if the Senate agrees to assist her?"

"They will not."

Both men turned as an older figure, still tall and straight, with an almost melancholy expression and sad smile intruded upon their conversation. Qui-Gon bowed to the other man. "Senator Palpatine."

"Master Jinn."

Qui-Gon straightened and waved to Anakin. "Anakin Skywalker, this is Senator Palpatine. The Senator speaks for Naboo in the Senate."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Senator."

Palpatine extended his hand and Anakin stared at it, his gloved hands clenching unconsciously at his sides. "The pleasure is mine, my boy." Palpatine's look didn't falter. "Come now, it's customary to shake hands."

Anakin extended one hand, managing not to wince when the Senator looked at the shrouded appendage with surprise and dropped his hand. Palpatine looked beyond to Qui-Gon and Anakin sensed more than saw his frown. The Senator, Padmé's ally on Coruscant, didn't approve of his gloves or of his manners. Swallowing the trepidation that accompanied the action, he stripped his gloves off one hand and extended it, managing not to tremble as he did. The Senator didn't know what he was asking and he wasn't about to explain it to the man. "I meant no disrespect, Senator."

The Senator's smile returned and Anakin's hand was clasped in the surprising strength of the older man's grip.

And Anakin saw nothing.

No visions, no futures, not even a void. Simply nothing. As if the Senator wasn't even touching him. As if Palpatine were beyond the stands of time or the influence of the Force. As if he didn't exist. Anakin's mind spin as he fought to compensate for the lack of vision, completely caught off guard.

Palpatine's voice came from a great distance and he missed what was said. Only when Anakin let go of the Senator's hand did the words register.

"I understand we have you to thank for the Queen's safe arrival on Coruscant."

Anakin managed to smile a weak half smile, quickly tugging his glove back on and hoping neither man would notice his trembling hands. He'd *never* shaken hands with anyone skin-to-skin and not seen their future. No one, not even the Jedi who'd caused so much mischief back on Tatooine. Even then he'd had a glimmer. But the Senator's handshake had revealed nothing. Nothing at all. It was a relief even as it was troubling. "She'd have found her way without me, Senator. She was in good hands with Master Jinn."

"Well said." Palpatine told him with a nod. "Are you studying to become a Jedi, Anakin?"

"No, sir."

"A pity."

"What did you mean the Senate will not act, Senator?" Qui-Gon's question was direct, deflecting the Senators questions from Anakin and the Order.

Anakin was grateful to the Jedi Master as he fell back, unable to stop the tremble that had gripped him from sliding down into his hands. He clasped them tightly together to avoid drawing notice to it. He couldn't comprehend *not* seeing a future. Not after he'd braced himself for the emotionally traumatic invasion. To not have it happen was both troubling and a relief. Anakin listened with only half an ear to the Senator's words.

Palpatine shrugged. "It is a fact, I'm afraid Master Jedi. The Senate is mired in corruption, those who accept bribes are using their influence to create a system where nothing can be achieved as no quorum can be made. Even the Supreme Chancellor is powerless to act without their approval. His influence over the Senators is marginal at best."

"I was under the impression that Chancellor Vallorum was one of Naboo's strongest supporters."

"Support is of little help when it cannot be used to safeguard our people, Master Jedi."

Anakin felt a shiver snake down his spine that had nothing to do with the lack of futuristic visions. "So what recourses are open to the Queen?"

Palpatine sighed heavily as if a great weight was settling, or had settled, on his shoulders. "Very few, Anakin. She is idealistic in believing that the Senate will act on our problems. Perhaps if a stronger individual held the seat of Supreme Chancellor something could have been done, but Chancellor Vallorum has little personal power or support base."

"What do you mean?" Anakin felt Qui-Gon's hand on his elbow, applying pressure as if to say he was to desist with this line of questioning. He ignored it, shaking it off as Palpatine answered. "Who would make a better Chancellor?"

“Bail Organa for one,” Palpatine told him easily. “He is well respected and has the support of a good portion of the Senators. His power base is already established, though I do question his motives at times.”

Qui-Gon spoke as Anakin opened his mouth to ask another question, cutting him off. “You don’t see any way for this to be resolved here, Senator?”

“Unfortunately, Master Jedi, the Queen’s pleas will fall on deaf and uncaring ears. Little will be done to alleviate the suffering of our people.”

“Quickly or at all?”

“That, my friend, will depend entirely on the delegates in the Senate.” Palpatine shook his head sadly. “I will be very surprised if they act at all.”

Anakin shivered again as dread snuck in to wrap about his heart. He already knew that Padmé’s pleas would be unsuccessful, but to hear someone else prophesize it because of the conditions in the Senate and the general malaise of the Senators was almost surreal. He pushed it away, thanking the Senator for his time. Palpatine left them in peace, heading for a meeting with the Queen, as Qui-Gon lead Anakin back out towards the landing pad.

“Qui-Gon?”

“Yes, Anakin?”

Anakin paused, wondering if his lack of visions would make sense to the Jedi Master. Maybe. He decided to ask the other question burning a hole in his brain before opening that line of thought. “Why do they have a Queen and a Senator?”

“What do you mean?”

“Naboo.” Anakin stopped on the platform, looking out across the sky lanes and large buildings. The sight took his breath away for a moment before he recalled himself. “Why have two representatives? Won’t their interests conflict?”

Qui-Gon chuckled. “It’s the way the Senate works, Anakin. The races represented don’t all live within a short hyper-space jump and so many have two representatives who collaborate. In Naboo’s case, they have a monarch and a Senator. The Senator to ensure they’re taken care of and have a voice in the Senate and the Queen to ensure the day to day operations and happiness of the people are taken care of. They communicate over the holo-net to ensure both are of similar opinions to prevent problems from arising between Senate representation and local management.”

“It seems overly complicated.”

The low chuckle of the Jedi Master was enough to break the tension. “I wouldn’t worry about the complications of the Senate, Anakin. You won’t be having anything to do with them beyond your relationship with Padmé.”

“Currently, you mean?”

“Planning on going into politics, my young friend?”

"It's too blood thirsty for my tastes," Anakin admitted, following Qui-Gon down to the speeder that pulled up just short of docking. "I think I prefer something with a little less intrigue."

"Well said, Anakin." Qui-Gon dropped down into the speeder's back seat, Anakin a step behind him. The speeder sped off and it was only then that Anakin noticed it was Obi-Wan who drove. The Jedi apprentice lifted his hand in greeting but kept his eyes and mind focused on the sky lanes.

Anakin turned back to Qui-Gon. "What will the Jedi Council want to talk to me about?"

"Your abilities, I imagine. As I explained, there are few Jedi with your far seeing abilities, and none with your ability to obtain possible future images with just a touch. At least, not without some form of concentration."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not bad in the terms you mean. With focus and training the ability could likely be controlled."

Anakin sat straighter, alarm bells ringing in his head. "You mean I could shake someone's hand without my gloves and *not* see their future?" He stopped, not voicing the second half of his question; was it possible someone else strong in the Force could *suppress* those skills, or prevent them?

"Exactly."

Anakin's mind raced as his thoughts collided into one another, a whirlwind of possibilities. If the visions could be controlled, he would be able to kiss Padmé and *not* see futures — simply enjoy the act of kissing her. Guilty heat flooded his face and he slumped back in his chair, hoping the Jedi couldn't read his mind.

"Is there a problem, Anakin?"

"What? Oh no," he shook his head. 'I was just thinking.' He stopped, turning the day's events over in his mind. Was that the reason he hadn't seen Senator Palpatine's future or was it something else entirely? "I didn't see the Senator's future."

"What?"

"I didn't" Anakin kept his voice as low as he could without being drowned out by the speeder's noises. "I think having so many people around is hindering my ability."

Qui-Gon reached out and, before Anakin could stop him, grabbed his forearm. His shirtsleeve was stripped back and Qui-Gon's palm settled, skin-on-skin, against his forearm.

The images were swift and sudden; almost immediate with the concentrated contact. The same visions he'd seen before, the ghostly images that had overlain previous futures, only this time they were clear and powerful. He saw the same nightmarish face grinning in malevolent glee, dual blades of red light spinning in powerful arcs even as the speed of the attack, and the subsequent blocks and parries of blue and green light, whirled through his mind. He saw—

Qui-Gon lifted his hand away.

Anakin began to shake, sweat having beaded on his forehead. He tugged his shirt sleeve down with a jerky movement.

"I think it's safe to say the population density isn't having an effect on your abilities, Anakin." Qui-Gon's tone held compassion. "I'm sorry I put you through the trauma of my future again."

Anakin jerked. At least he hadn't seen Qui-Gon's death; just the events leading up to it. "You didn't put me through anything, Qui-Gon, the Force and its sick sense of humor did." He took a deep, steadying breath. "Do you think because I've seen your future once, I might be more susceptible to seeing it again."

"There is a distinct possibility. When we land, why don't you see if you can see Obi-Wan's future?"

Anakin glanced at his new friend who was ignoring them in favor of concentrating on the sky lanes and their traffic. He shook his head. "I'd rather not know what his future holds."

"Even knowing that it could save him from a destiny like mine?"

Anakin shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the speeder came in on final approach towards the temple. "Changing someone's destiny is a good way to divert future courses," Anakin replied cryptically. "Sometimes it's better to be ignorant of what you'll face, or the choices you'll have to make, when you know there are worst things than the present."

Qui-Gon didn't answer as the speeder settled to the landing pad and the Jedi Temple rose up around them. The purpose of their visit came crashing back as Anakin hopped out of the speeder. The Jedi council was waiting to speak with him and life was about to get very, very interesting.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Anakin stood in the anteroom to the main council chamber pacing back and forth nervously. His mind was racing, hoping that Qui-Gon would do most of his talking for him. He knew the Jedi Masters would be curious about his talents — even the stranger who’d exposed him to Watto had been initially curious. The question was, once they were assured he was genuine, would they resent him? He had heard Jedi didn’t fear, so he found it unlikely that they’d fear him, but would they find him a threat? Bind him to the Temple and prevent his “interference” in the Queen’s situation?

Would they balk when he told them Qui-Gon would never return — alive — from Naboo?

He continued to pace, letting the sound of his footsteps count off the seconds. There were no time pieces in the room, no indications beyond the setting sun — which wasn’t really a sun at all since it wasn’t visible with the naked eye — of exactly how much time had passed since Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had entered the room.

He judged about an hour, possibly two, and each pacing session brought him around and back to the window that faced towards the senate hall. It was impossible to miss and possibly one of the most impressive buildings Anakin had ever seen. It didn’t help that he *knew* Padmé was in session with the Senate at this very moment. He *knew* she was having her motion denied. And he *knew* it was killing her inside to have the plight of her people brushed away like yesterday’s garbage.

And there was nothing he could do to help.

Not a damn thing. He paced away from the window, yo-yoing from thoughts of Padmé back to the mysterious Senator that shared her responsibilities for the planet of Naboo. Palpatine. A mystery if there ever was one. He’d heeded Qui-Gon’s advice and removed his gloves upon entering the temple. His bare hands were folded now in the small of his back and he felt strangely naked without the leather barrier between his flesh and everyone else’s.

A stirring from the council chamber, accompanied by a surge of emotion so guarded he would have missed it had he been more calm, brought Anakin around on his heel to face the door.

But it didn’t open.

The emotional surge subsided, carefully controlled by Masters of control, and the debate continued. He wasn’t exactly sure why he was so certain a debate ensued; it simply *seemed* like the right term.

Anakin returned to his pacing, his trajectory taking him back to the window and, with it, thoughts of Padmé. She would be desolate tonight, her ideals about the Senate and its powers in ruins despite his warnings. He wondered if she’d blame him for this too. He’d seen it, foretold it, but been unable to tell her how to avoid it. In fact, had counseled her against

avoiding it. He sighed, running one hand through his hair. Nothing about knowing the future was ever easy.

The door to the council chamber creaked open and Obi-Wan emerged — Anakin could see his reflection in the glass. He waited, silently, but Obi-Wan closed the door behind him and leaned against it, his expression relieved. “I thought they’d never let me leave.”

“Rough session?”

“No rougher than yours,” Obi-Wan told him with a half-smile. “It’s not easy to wait, is it?”

“Did you have to do this?” Anakin was grateful for the distraction from his troubling thoughts. “Wait for them to see you, I mean?”

Obi-Wan’s chuckle brought him around to face his friend. “All apprentices must. Unlike you, we’re expected to sit on that stool,” he pointed to a nearby cushioned stool, “and wait quietly. As someone not looking to become a Jedi, or someone not in Jedi training, you’re hardly held to the same standard.”

“A good thing too,” Anakin replied dryly. “After an hour I was ready to climb the walls.”

“My Master thought you might need someone to help calm you down before the meeting. I see he was right.”

“It’s not about calm, Obi-Wan,” Anakin told him honestly. “I’m about as calm as I’ll ever be.”

“Then what’s troubling you, my friend?”

Anakin settled onto the small padded bench under the window and leaned back against the wall, stretching his legs out in front of him. “I’m not very fond of Jedi,” he told Obi-Wan frankly. “You know it, your Master told you. I can’t help but feeling like... like I’m opening myself up to be used again. A Jedi ensured I was put into a pod racer, so I learned to fly. A Jedi ensured I remained in Watto’s grimy excuse for a shop until your Master walked in and I could win the Boonta Eve Classic. Not that I mind winning, it just seems...”

Obi-Wan cracked a grin. “Preordained?”

“Manipulation,” Anakin corrected. “I feel like everyone who knows about my abilities, no matter who or what they are, will want to profit from them.”

“You don’t think they’ll give you the choice?”

“I’m too old to be trained as a Jedi, Obi-Wan, the only other option they have is to convince me to see things their way and do things their way. Their terms. Their restrictions. Their say. It’d be like being a slave again.”

Obi-Wan stroked his beardless chin thoughtfully, watching Anakin with intelligent eyes. “It stands to reason that you start off in a position of power if they have to mold you to their way of thinking.” He said at last. “You have something they need or want so the terms of this association are yours to set. They know it but that won’t stop them from trying to have the upper hand. If you approach this as the person with something to offer, they will have no choice but to acquiesce to your terms if they wish your cooperation.”

“You mean go in there like they owe me something.”

Obi-Wan’s lips twitched. “Basically, yes.”

The door opened and Qui-Gon stepped into the room, drawing both of the younger men’s gazes. “They’ll see you now, Anakin.”

Anakin took a deep breath and pushed to his feet, brushing his worn clothes down so they were less wrinkly. He didn’t have many sets and these were patched several times over. “A position of power, right, Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan was already on his feet, having stayed close to the door, and with his Master. He slanted a look at Qui-Gon, but nodded. “Exactly.”

“They’re the most reasonable beings in the Galaxy, Anakin.” Qui-Gon told him amused as he approached. “I’m certain you’ll come to some kind of mutually beneficial agreement.”

Anakin laughed nervously before schooling his face into seriousness. Somehow it seemed appropriate for approaching the Jedi council. Qui-Gon stepped back into the council chamber with Obi-Wan. Anakin took a deep, bracing breath, making himself relax, before stepping into the council chamber.

The room was almost blinding in its brilliance and he stopped a moment to let his eyes adjust. The fuzzy beings came into focus slowly and, when they did, a shock of recognition slammed through him like a thunder bolt and all of Obi-Wan’s advice flew from his thoughts. Anger simmered to the surface immediately on the heels of shocked recognition and he pointed one finger accusatorily at the one member of the Jedi Order he’d hoped never to see again.

“*You!* You ruined my life!”

The silence in the room was heavy with surprise as Anakin’s accusatory tone sliced through their shock. Anakin saw red, darting past Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan without thinking and threw himself at one of the Jedi; the only Jedi Master who’d half-risen out of his chair with Anakin’s appearance. The only human in the room and a black skinned devil Anakin remembered well.

The Jedi he knew as Kamir Brandt.

“Anakin!”

Qui-Gon’s voice didn’t penetrate the fog of as Anakin, unimpeded, bodily slammed into the Jedi Master and sent them both tumbling to the floor. Anakin’s hands wrapped around Kamir’s neck and, for a single instant he was able to feel the air being choked off. Then, like being blindsided with a super nova, the visions began. The visions were powerful and primitive all at once.

He’d forgotten he wasn’t wearing his gloves.

Kamir was standing in an arena, surrounded by strange looking droids, an amethyst blade shimmering in his hands. Standing back to back with Obi-Wan as they fought strange looking flying creatures. Going one on one against a man, in the rain, wearing full body armor and a jet pack. Facing an older man wielding a shimmering crimson blade and seeing him holding that man at his mercy...

Familiar hands ripped him bodily from the prone Jedi and sent him sliding back into the center of the chamber.

Silence, almost deathly in nature, descended over the room. It was broken only by Kamir's shallow breathing as he dragged air down his injured wind pipe and Anakin's half-sobbing breaths as he fought to shake off the visions and the general feeling of urgency that permeated them. He shook, both with the force of his anger and the impact of the futuristic images that had bombarded his conscious mind.

They'd been different, very different, from the echoes he'd seen almost ten years ago. Whatever the Jedi had done, he'd lifted himself from his previously precarious path and made his way onto the Jedi Council. He'd become more powerful than Anakin had foreseen.

Obi-Wan crouched next to him, his expression concerned. "Anakin?"

"I'm alright."

"Your voice is shaking."

Anakin took a deep breath and then another until the rapid pounding of his pulse stopped roaring in his ears. To say that the appearance of the Jedi who'd betrayed him to Watto was the last thing he'd expected when entering a chamber of the "most reasonable beings in the Galaxy" would have been an understatement. He took a final deep breath and looked to Obi-Wan, meeting his gaze with a faint smile. "I'm alright now."

Obi-Wan got to his feet and offered his hand in a silent show of support.

Anakin looked at it and held up one finger to have him wait. Acutely conscious of the eyes watching him suspiciously, he reached into his pocket and retrieved his gloves. With silent movements that took only half a second, he slipped them on and accepted Obi-Wan's hand. He regained his feet and turned to meet Qui-Gon's knowing look. The older Jedi had already figured out what was happening; only he didn't have the whole story yet.

"An explanation we must have, yes?"

Anakin's gaze was drawn to a little green creature who sat in the chair next to the one he'd knocked over. He felt more than saw the other Jedi Masters agree and lifted his gaze to meet Qui-Gon's again. "Jedi Brandt is better equipped to supply the answer than I."

"Brandt?"

Anakin leveled a cool look on the Jedi Master he'd attacked. "Unless of course he didn't even give me the courtesy of his real name."

"To Master Windu you refer?"

"If that's who this man now claims to be, then yes."

"Answers we await, Master Windu," the green creature told him patiently.

The man Anakin knew as Kamir Brandt had righted his chair and was now seating himself with an air of injured dignity. Anakin's expression tightened as he waited to hear what the Jedi had to say, dimly aware that Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon now flanked him as he faced the man who'd changed the course of his life.

The dark-skinned man finally lifted his head. “Of course, Master Yoda.” He nodded briefly to the small green alien and then turned his gaze back to Anakin. “My real name, Anakin, is Mace Windu.”

Anakin’s hands fisted at his sides as he strove to maintain a grip on his temper. “You couldn’t even give me the courtesy of your real name when you destroyed my life?”

Mace’s chin came up haughtily but he said nothing.

“To what do you refer, young Skywalker?”

“My business is my own,” he replied flatly, “and I refuse to have anything to do with individuals who would place an individual of such questionable values and morals in a place of power. Good day.”

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon made no move to stop him as Anakin turned on his heel and walked for the door.

“Anger will get you little, young man,” came the soft voice of one of the other Masters. “The door cannot be opened without our consent.”

“If you keep me here as your prisoner,” Anakin retorted levelly, “you’re no better than that pile of *schutta* you claim is a Jedi Master.”

No other Masters spoke, but the doors yielded to his hands as he pushed through and slammed it behind him. The boom of the closing doors was almost ominous and Anakin leaned against the door for a fraction of a second, taking a deep breath as he fought to reign in his anger. Anger had never gotten him anywhere, but he couldn’t think straight with Kam — he grimaced as he corrected himself — with *Mace Windu*, illustrious Jedi Master, in the same room.

He strode back to the window in the waiting antechamber and stopped, lifting one palm to press against the window as he stared at the Senate building. His thoughts, surprisingly, didn’t return to Padmé; he didn’t see anything beyond the scene that had been played out inside the Jedi Council chambers.

He’d imagined running into Kamir again and how it would play out. He’d never dreamed that he’d been so thoroughly duped by a cover story and that he’d find the Jedi on the council. He’d never even considered it a possibility, having begun to believe Qui-Gon’s reassurances that Jedi were a wise and noble people.

He should have known better.

The door opened behind him and Obi-Wan emerged, his expression concerned.

“I’m alright, Obi-Wan,” he informed his friend before the inevitable question was asked. “When do we leave?” Obi-Wan remained silent and Anakin half-turned to look at him questioningly. “We *are* leaving, aren’t we?”

“The Masters still wish to speak with you,” Obi-Wan’s admission seemed reluctant, like the messenger who brings bad news. “They have some questions they’d like answered.”

Anakin turned back to the window. “No.”

He heard Obi-Wan's sigh and wasn't surprised when he was joined at the window. "They agreed to meet with you on short notice, Anakin. They believe in the courtesy of an explanation. They will want to know why."

"I've already told them why. That man ensured I spent three extra years as a slave to a being who loved nothing more than exploiting my talents for his own ends and ensuring I knew I was worthless. Three years, Obi-Wan. My mother made an offer for me the day after Kam— Mace left. Did you know that? The *day after*. I could have been *free*. Instead, because of the Jedi's advice, Watto turned down the price he'd previously given my mother and said, in no uncertain terms, that I wasn't for sale. She begged him to release me, but I was too valuable. All because of that selfish Jedi."

"You don't think the council needs to hear that?"

"It's none of their business." Anakin leaned forward to rest his forehead against the coolness of the window and closed his eyes. "I never imagined I'd see him again, let alone on the Jedi Council."

Obi-Wan's hand squeezed his shoulder. "If you won't speak with the council, will you speak with Master Yoda?"

"The little green alien?" Anakin slanted a look at his friend to be sure.

Obi-Wan nodded. "He is most interested in your abilities. Yoda's a very old and very wise Jedi; and he can see futures as you do with enough meditation."

"So his interest is purely professional?"

"I'm sure curiosity over what just transpired will come into play somewhere," Obi-Wan assured him with a half-smile. "Now that Master Windu has been challenged, he will have to tell the council of the incident around your accusations. Do you not think it would be best to hear the tale from both sides and render judgment, rather than simply taking Master Windu's word for what transpired?"

Anakin's smile was sour. "Your diplomatic skills are showing."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

Anakin sighed. "You're not, I just don't like the thought of complete strangers judging me for events they didn't participate in."

"They have your initial reactions upon entering the chamber. They'd be imprudent to dismiss them out of hand. The fact that you pushed through the mental reach of every Master present to even hit your target speaks for you in ways nothing else could."

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't feel it?"

"Feel what?" Anakin turned to face his friend fully. "You're not making any sense."

"The Masters each tried to restrain you and halt your progress towards Master Windu. *Each one*, Anakin."

Anakin felt heat climbing his neck. “To be honest I was so shocked and hurt by that Jedi’s appearance, I didn’t feel the Force at all — until I touched him.”

“Thank the Force for small miracles.” Obi-Wan glanced towards the door leading into the council chamber. “Does that mean you’ll talk with them?”

Anakin sighed, following Obi-Wan’s gaze and made up his mind. “It means I’ll tell them my side of the story. I’ll answer their questions, I’ll even give them some hints for what’s to come, but — when this is over — I *will not* have any more to do with the Council of an order that harbors a character like that Jedi Master.”

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Anakin stepped back into the council chamber with long, sure strides and stood in the exact center of the circle on the floor. He looked at Mace Windu once and then pointedly turned his face to Master Yoda. He chose his words deliberately, as if they were the only two beings in the room. “Obi-Wan tells me you wished to speak with me, Master Yoda.”

Anakin ignored the ripple of resentment that was quickly masked by the other Masters, including the flare of anger he felt from Mace. He felt amusement from both Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon and was peevishly glad he had *some* allies in the room.

Yoda regarded him shrewdly. “Dangerous anger is, Anakin.”

“You can thank your Master Windu for encouraging it.” Anakin delivered that piece of news with as level a tone as he could. He was somewhat proud of the fact his voice didn’t shake. He did notice the effect it had on the Jedi Masters; he *felt* the ripples it caused and the confusion. He wondered what lies the Jedi Master had been telling his comrades. “I had plenty of time while my Master Watto beat me to curse Jedi everywhere and plot revenge.”

If he’d wanted to shock them, he’d succeeded. Even Mace, the man who’d left him in slavery, looked slightly sick.

Yoda appeared to be the only Master unaffected. “So sure, are you, that the actions of Master Windu placed you in harm’s way?”

Anakin smiled bitterly. “You tell me, Master Yoda. Until the Boonta Eve classic I hadn’t won a single high-stakes pod race — an occupation *Mace Windu* suggested to my employer because of my reflexes. Every time I lost, every time I wrecked my pod, Watto lashed me. Fifty lashes for each lap not completed.”

“Proof have you?”

Anakin glared at the green alien. “The word of a former slave isn’t good enough, huh?” His words were bitter.

“Your former status have no bearing here, young man,” one of the female Masters told him, a graceful looking creature with striped head tails that reached over her head and down her chest. “We are simply interested in the truth.”

“Spare me,” Anakin told her shortly. “Everyone needs proof from a slave.” He reached one hand back and grabbed the collar of his shirt behind his head, yanking it forward to expose his upper torso. The shirt came off with ease — he wore it loose to prevent it from irritating his back — and held it in one hand.

The silence was electric, damning, and Anakin dared them to comment. He turned in place, meeting each of their gazes until they looked away, unable to meet his piercing stare. A testament to the damage Watto had done.

“Force, Anakin!”

Anakin met Obi-Wan horrified gaze but couldn't sustain it, and instead turned to the next Master as he pushed the sympathy he saw in his friend's gaze from his mind. He saw his reflection; he knew what he looked like. His fresh welts — the ones from just a week before — still hadn't healed. His back was a criss-cross of old scar tissue, some reaching around to disappear under the fall of his arms. In the center of his chest was an almost diamond shaped scar where Watto's talons had pressed deep enough to wound, but not deep enough to maim. Watto had never, ever maimed — it wasn't good for business. Anakin finished his slow turn with Mace, who looked distinctly uncomfortable and couldn't meet his gaze. He laughed bitterly into the silence. “Proof enough for you, Master Jedi?”

“Your point you make, young Skywalker.” Yoda's tone was even, peaceful. “Your story we must hear.”

Anakin shook his head. “Judge me on what you see, Master. You've seen proof of my suffering, you saw my reaction when I encountered Kam— Mace again. I will agree to speak with you of my unique abilities but I will not share with you my past.”

“Put your shirt on.”

Anakin glanced at Mace. “Don't like to look at the fruit of your labors, *Master Jedi*?” His tone made the title an insult.

“Anakin.”

Anakin glanced at Qui-Gon, noting the firm set of his lips and the reproach in his gaze. It wasn't without compassion but his message was clear. Anakin had made his point. Anakin conceded with a tilt of his head and shrugged the shirt back on, covering the scars. He ran a hand through his tussled hair before letting them fall back to his sides. He waited, knowing the Jedi would ask their questions.

Finally the same alien woman who'd spoken before spoke again. “Master Jinn has informed us of your unusual ability to see futures, young man.” Her words were carefully chosen and delivered in a calm, soothing tone. “We are at an impasse as to if this is a beneficial gift or one fraught with much danger.”

“Both.” Anakin told her with a tilt of his lips.

“Does it place you in peril?”

Anakin chuckled and gestured to Mace. “You all saw the aftermath of one such vision. I was weak as a newborn baby and couldn't control my trembling.”

“This happens every time?”

“It depends on the... the sense behind the vision, Lady Jedi.”

She inclined her head, as if in apology. “Master Shaak Ti.”

Anakin smiled, mimicking the gesture. “Did you have any other questions, Master Shaak Ti?”

"A few," she conceded. "We all have questions. I would like you to explain what you mean by your answer to if this is a good gift or a dangerous one. Why did you reply as you did?"

Anakin shrugged, feeling Qui-Gon's gaze on him as he spoke with the female Jedi, and tried not to squirm. "I answered as I did because my mother taught me that telling the truth is the right thing to do. I believe as I do because I have seen both good and evil come of my visions. I have seen the dangerous, most likely paths people will tread. Your... Your Master Windu for example."

"You saw his future?"

Anakin glanced back to Mace, keeping an eye on his reactions from the corner of his eye. "We were playing a game of chance, one that involved both skill and speed. He insisted I remove my gloves to lessen the temptation to cheat. No one, even offworlders, believe a slave will play fair." He smiled sourly. "During the match he grabbed my hand and forced my fingers open to check if I was cheating. I saw his failure."

"In what?"

"I saw him fail on his quest to become a Jedi Knight."

"This has obviously not happened." Came the voice of another Master. "How do we know that your vision is of use if such a radical shift has occurred?"

Anakin turned towards the stuffy, dictative Master. "Mace reached a crossroad after our encounter. I saw the future he was most likely to follow based on his actions thus far. I saw a shimmer of a different future, one that could be reached only if he chose to look at himself and fought to change the darkness in himself. It was unlikely, but it was there. Mace has chosen, obviously, the least likely path he could have followed."

"Always in motion, the future is." Yoda told the Council firmly. "A gift young Skywalker has, rare it is, for a Jedi to see futures by touch."

"Don't forget his midichlorien count, Master Yoda," Obi-Wan spoke up bravely. "It's even higher than yours."

"Hmmm," Yoda stroked his chin, watching Anakin with a carefully neutral expression. "Powerful you are, Anakin, but untrained."

"I've no desire to be a Jedi even if I could be trained." Anakin told him flatly.

"A responsibility you have, to those who would rely on you for protection, yes?"

"There is no one."

"Of Queen Amidala, I speak."

Anakin managed not to blush at the mention of her name. "I don't require Jedi training to protect her when she returns to her world, Master Yoda. I won't even be on the planet." He proceeded to explain where he'd be with great detail, drawing a grudging respect from some of the more skeptical Masters. He finished. "The Queen will be after the viceroy. Those with her won't be Jedi."

Yoda cocked his head. "Know this do you?"

Anakin's gaze met Qui-Gon's and he saw the slight nod of permission. He took a deep breath. "Did Qui-Gon explain about the Sith we ran into on Tatooine?"

The nod was both a confirmation and an encouragement.

Anakin forged ahead. "Someone will learn that the Queen returns to Naboo to free her people. I don't know who; I've never encountered them. I *do* know that the same Sith will be waiting when we arrive. He will challenge Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan with a double bladed red lightsaber. He... He'll—" He faltered and stopped, his gaze catching the shocked expression on Obi-Wan's face. He couldn't do it. He couldn't tell the council and his new friend that Qui-Gon, the stoic, wise man who was the calm at the center of a storm would die.

"More to tell have you, I sense."

"I'd rather not, Master Yoda."

"He's seen my death," Qui-Gon's words were spoken matter-of-factly. "At the hands of this Sith."

"No!"

Anakin turned his full gaze on Obi-Wan's aghast expression. The shock and surprise the individual Masters were feeling wasn't so easily masked this time. But Anakin couldn't catch Obi-Wan's eye because his friend's gaze was glued to his Master. There was nothing Anakin could do but confirm it. He swallowed hard. "I'm afraid he's telling the truth Obi-Wan. The Sith will kill him."

"And me?" Obi-Wan demanded. "Will the Sith kill me too?"

"I don't know."

"A possible future this is," Yoda interjected. "But disturbing. A strong Jedi is Master Jinn and powerful with his lightsaber."

"It won't matter." Anakin knew he sounded bleak. "Unless he refuses to fight the Sith, Master Jinn will die."

"And if we sent another pair of Jedi in their stead?"

Anakin turned to face the aristocratic voice that spoke the suggestion. His smile was bitter. "You won't. If you did, the Nabooians would fail and the Trade Federation would gain complete control of the world. You'd be condemning them to virtual slavery to save a single Jedi Knight."

"What if we send additional Knights?" This from Mace. "A pair of Masters to help with the Sith."

Anakin looked at the dark-skinned man curiously, as if for the first time. "It's not one of the possibilities I foresaw. It's possible one of them may be killed instead of Master Jinn — or that he may die anyway."

"What know you of this Sith, Anakin?"

"I didn't touch him," his reply was almost apologetic. "But I do know, from what I saw on Tatooine and what I've seen in Qui-Gon's future, is that this Sith is a highly trained fighter —

a lightsaber master. His blade is double-bladed and, from what the visions revealed, he is capable of not only defending against two Jedi, but taking the offensive. He uses the Force,' Anakin rubbed his forehead as if to stimulate his brain. "But I don't know to what degree."

"Knowledge this is." Yoda replied approvingly. "A way to prepare for this confrontation and, perhaps, avoid the outcome. Master Windu, accompany them you will."

Anakin objected immediately. "I don't think—"

Shaak Ti cut him off. "Knight Luminara's skills compliment Obi-Wan's."

Obi-Wan started this time. "I don't think—"

Qui-Gon cut his Padawan off. "With respect, Masters, who are we to question the will of the Force."

"Master!"

Anakin met Qui-Gon's gaze. He saw a spark of dark humor and determination to match his own. Qui-Gon didn't want to die, but he didn't want anyone else dying in his place either. Qui-Gon continued. "Another pair of Jedi to assist the Queen would likely be graciously accepted. Her protection is paramount."

"She can protect herself." Anakin said softly. "No offence, but she doesn't *need* more Jedi protectors."

Qui-Gon's chuckle broke a suddenly brittle silence. "Anakin is quite right. The Queen is familiar with Obi-Wan and myself and she trusts us. Another pair of Jedi may inadvertently tip the balance or prevent something from happening that is essential for us to succeed."

"I cannot accept that your death is a necessary price to free Naboo." This from Shaak Ti.

Anakin swallowed hard, a sudden inspiration almost making him dizzy. "Qui-Gon?"

"Yes, Anakin?"

"What if... what if the council makes the decision to send other Jedi and... and I see if the future's been changed?"

Qui-Gon was immediately shaking his head. "You wouldn't know Naboo's fate without including the Queen as one of the futures you read."

"She should be out of session by now." Obi-Wan offered. "I could go get her."

"A recess," Yoda told them by way of agreement. "Until join us, Queen Amidala can."

There was no more to say as Obi-Wan exited the room, Anakin on his heels. Anakin grabbed Obi-Wan's shoulder and stopped him out of range of the council chamber. "Just remember to grab the right Queen."

Obi-Wan's smile was faint. "I have the easy job. You might want to prepare yourself for this — it's not going to be easy."

"It never is."

Obi-Wan returned less than an hour later with Padmé, dressed as the Queen, and her bodyguards in tow. The decoys, especially the head decoy Sabé, were still whispering furiously about foolishness and unnecessary risks when they entered the antechamber to the Jedi Council.

Anakin was sitting on the bench under the window, and had been resting — as close as he ever came to meditation — when the whisper of their skirts brought his eyes open with a snap. Padmé was barely recognizable under the makeup of her station and it wasn't until he caught her gaze he was sure, really sure, that it truly was Padmé. When those soft brown eyes met his full of pain and sorrow, he felt the immediate urge to comfort her. And the next immediate response was a flush because he knew how awkward he'd look trying to comfort the monarch of a people he'd never met.

He hadn't expected her to be so unapproachable in her official capacity. True, he'd seen her half dressed as the Queen, but that was nothing compared to the cool persona in front of him. He bowed awkwardly, drawing a giggle from one of the handmaidens. "Thank you for coming, your majesty."

"Obi-Wan tells me they are considering adding more Jedi to our party."

Anakin flinched. "Only if the future for your planet isn't sacrificed for it, milady."

"It had better not be."

Anakin looked away uncomfortably. He could feel Sabé's dark eyes boring into him, skeptical of what she'd heard. The door to the council chamber opened the Qui-Gon emerged once more. "We will see you now."

Padmé spoke something to Sabé and the handmaiden frowned, shaking her head. Anakin saw Padmé's eyes narrow and overhead her next comment. "I am perfectly safe in a room full of Jedi Masters!"

He resisted the urge to chuckle as her argument was won and the handmaidens waited as she crossed with Obi-Wan to the door, Anakin joining them with long strides.

They entered the council chamber and stopped. Anakin blinked. The comfortable chairs were gone. In their places were large, round stool-like divans which each held two Jedi Masters. Mace and Yoda shared the one directly across from the door and the rest spread out in complete circle, as if to encompass the circle on the floor. All but one was occupied. Qui-Gon led them to the center and turned to Obi-Wan, pointing to the divan without a Master.

Obi-Wan seated himself and then Qui-Gon joined him, leaving Anakin and Padmé standing in the center of the room. Qui-Gon met Padmé's gaze, but Anakin knew the words were for him. "We are going to send additional Jedi Knights with you to Naboo, Your Highness. These Jedi are to guard you when my apprentice and I are called away on Jedi business."

Padmé frowned; opening her mouth to object, but Anakin placed his hand on her arm. "Just listen," he murmured.

She closed her mouth.

The Jedi continued. "Force willing, these Jedi will succeed in lending their assistance to the liberation of Naboo and your safety. Anakin."

Anakin nodded, removing his gloves and tucking them into his waist band before holding his hands out to Padmé. She stared at him, not understanding. He smiled faintly. "It's alright," he told her softly. "We just want to see if this will work."

Understanding dawned in her eyes and she shook her head, folding her hands behind her back. "No, Anakin. I can't do that to you."

Anakin searched her gaze, begging her silently to trust him even as his hands fell slowly back to his sides. "This is my choice, Padmé. They're not making me do it. I just want to know if, by changing the players involved, we have the same chance of success."

"In no danger will Skywalker be," assured Yoda from one side of the circle. "Control the visions we can. Help understand them, yes?"

Padmé shook her head again, her knuckles turning white as she clenched them tighter. "It's not right."

"Padmé," Anakin stepped closer to her, ignoring their audience. He searched her expression slowly, looking for the source of her reluctance. "If you had the chance to prevent the death of a friend, would you take it?"

Her gaze was guardedly curious. "Of course I would."

"Then help me see if changing this aspect of the future will save Master Jinn's life."

She jerked as if he'd struck her, her hands falling to her side. She turned, meeting the gaze of the Jedi in question and Qui-Gon simply nodded, confirming Anakin's dire prediction. She shook her head in mute denial, disbelieving the prediction. "You can't be sure."

"I've seen it," Anakin assured her. "I wish I hadn't. If we continue as we have and return to Naboo, Qui-Gon will die."

"Then we'll delay."

"It won't help."

"You can't know that."

Anakin sighed. "Padmé. The danger waiting on Naboo is a dark, Force related danger. It's one that can't be put off or ignored. It must be faced; we simply need to know if meeting that danger means a Jedi sacrifice."

She shuddered, and there was no mistaking her fear despite her delicate control. "So the price now is having your whole universe turned inside out while the Force shows you a possible future? There has to be another way."

"Not a quick one. I volunteered for this, Padmé. It's alright, I promise."

Padmé glanced around at their audience before her gaze met his again and he could see how much it hurt her to know that she'd be hurting him. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. There was little more he could say if that didn't sway her.

She took her time, looking around the carefully prepared circle of Jedi from start to finish. When her eyes met his once more they were shadowed by regret, but Anakin knew he'd won. "Alright, I'll do it."

Anakin found a smile for her and extended his hands again.

Padmé's gaze lingered on them for long moments before she slowly lifted her own. Anakin could feel her gaze on his face as her fingers slid between his. He lifted his eyes to meet hers, their gazes locking when suddenly, almost violently, Anakin was driven to his knees with the force of the visions.

The Jedi surrounding him acted as anchors and controls, manipulating the images to be shown only those things which they wanted to see. They watched dispassionately as they slowed the images, giving them an almost ghost-like substance as they rose to fill the room and show the future to those watching.

Anakin was barely conscious of Padmé's eyes widening as she looked beyond his shoulder, suddenly privy to actions she hadn't yet taken. Privy to the knowledge of the future. Knowledge that, in itself, might change the events and possible outcomes.

The Force sung through his veins, racing like hot magma and burning the images into his mind. He felt himself losing control, slipping into that void to be caught up in the images—

And something yanked him back. He never knew what, for the mental bombardment continued, blocking out any and all focus except that of the hands holding his. She was his life-line despite the images swirling about them.

Anakin never knew how long it continued. It could have been moments, or minutes, or it could have been hours. He was barely coherent when Padmé was finally told to pull away from him. Qui-Gon rose, breaking the chain, and moved to Anakin's side as Padmé reluctantly slid her hands free. Anakin didn't register the sudden change as his mind slipped from consciousness into oblivion.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Anakin woke to find himself in a strange environment.

The windows were shuttered, darkened deliberately to keep the room in semi-darkness. The surface on which he lay wasn't uncomfortable, but it wasn't comfortable either. Padded, but firmly, it supported him without doing injury and gave a sense of security for its solidity. His head was throbbing, aching and clouded. He couldn't remember what he'd been doing that had landed him in such a state, let alone this chamber. He pushed himself up on his elbows, staring at the shuttered window in confusion.

Where am I?

"In the meditation chamber you are."

Anakin's head snapped around at the softly spoken words. "The where?"

"Meditation chamber." Yoda was seated on the edge of whatever was supporting him. "Recovery time you needed."

Anakin's head throbbed painfully and he let himself slide back into a prone position. He rubbed his forehead. "Recovery... Padmé!"

The images came flooding back. Images of Padmé failing with the help of the Jedi for the ruse she would need to fool the viceroy would never have worked. They would never believe the Jedi to send their warriors with the decoy.

He closed his eyes, but the images continued to play back and forth in his mind. He couldn't even focus on the last of the images. The ones where their decision was reversed and Padmé succeeded in ousting the Trade federation. He couldn't bring himself to play the image after that; of Padmé, dressed in bridal white, standing by his side before her people. The image had been faint, almost ethereal in its quality, but clear. Yet it was overridden by the original images.

The sight of Padmé's broken body laying crumpled before the throne of the people she'd tried to protect. The sight of the Jedi, cut down from behind, the decoy, Sabé caught and forced to take Padmé's place; signing a treaty in Queen Amidala's name when Queen Amidala was in fact dying at her feet. He felt sick as he remembered Padmé's helplessness, all thanks to the good intentions of the Jedi, as her people were condemned to slavery and she was left to die.

His voice was hoarse when he finally spoke. "It won't work."

"Know this we do."

"Then you won't send more Jedi."

"To still go, Master Windu insists."

“He can’t!” Anakin turned on the diminutive Jedi Master, his eyes blazing as sudden adrenaline killed his headache and cleared his mind. “If he goes, her plan fails. He can’t be allowed to go on this mission!”

“Understand you do not.” Yoda’s reproach was mild. “Alone Queen Amidala will be. To assist Qui-Gon Master Windu will.”

“And Obi-Wan?”

“Three are stronger than two.”

Anakin was silent for a long minute, his mind rebelling at the thought of going through the deliberately focused exercise a second time. “We don’t know it will succeed.”

“Trust in the Force I do, Anakin. So too, should you.”

“Trust in a Force that allows Masters such a Qui-Gon Jinn to die? Men that are the epitome of everything you strive to be — and yet allows those who drag your name through the mud, like Master Windu, to survive and flourish?” Anakin shook his head. “Forgive me, Master Yoda, but I don’t see a lot of reason to place my trust in the Force.”

“A reason, these events have, Anakin. Question them, we should not.”

“I don’t—”

A commotion outside the room cut him off, a familiar voice, raised in a commanding tone, muted by the walls. “I do not care, Master Jedi! I was promised that no harm would come to him. He is far from unharmed thanks to you and your schemes. Until I see, with my own eyes, that Anakin has come to no permanent damage I will not be turned away!”

Anakin pushed himself into a semi-sitting position, the nausea seeming to have dissipated with the sound of her voice. A murmuring beyond the door caught his attention as someone tried to placate the young Queen, but her next words proved she was having none of it.

“Either you open that door, Master Jedi, or I open it myself! I don’t care if your healers have looked at him; he needs time and rest to recover from your tortures.”

Another murmur and Padmé continued. “Self-inflicted or not, he never would have gone along with it if you hadn’t tricked him into thinking you could control it! Open that door now!”

A murmur, a scramble and the sudden sound of blaster fire — a single bolt — had the door swishing open to reveal a very distraught, very angry looking Padmé. Her hand held a smoking blaster for a split second and then it was gone, tumbling through the air into the outstretched hand of Master Yoda.

He pinned the diminutive Queen with a disapproving look. “Had the same effect, a knock would, Queen Amidala. Random blasters can be, dangerous it is in such an enclosed space.”

Padmé’s hands dropped to her hips, the motion displaying her vexation like nothing else as she stalked into the room, her eyes blazing. “Decorum be damned, Master Yoda; I needed to see Anakin.”

“See him, you can. No harm has come to him.”

Padmé seemed to deflate, her anger disappearing as she turned towards Anakin. His heart leapt as her gaze softened, her brown eyes turning an almost molten color as she took two steps and then stopped at the edge of the cushion on which he half-lay. “Are you alright?”

He stared at her, wondering if she was real for a brief moment before finding his tongue. “I’m a little queasy, but no lasting damage.”

Padmé shot a dark look at Yoda over her shoulder. “If you mind, Master Yoda, I’d like a moment *alone* with Anakin.”

Yoda obliged, shuffling from the room and then closing the doors partially behind him. They’d have to be fixed later.

Padmé turned her gaze back to Anakin, this time starting at the tips of his still booted feet and working their way upwards, as if to ascertain that he hadn’t come to injury. He lay back again, using his elbows to prop himself up, and watched as her brown eyes filled with tears as they traveled over his chest, and finally settled on his face again. “Anakin, I…” She stopped, looking at the edge of the large cushion uncertainly, as if she didn’t know if he’d want her close.

He nodded to it. “Have a seat.”

She did, bringing them back to eye level, and her hand reached out to touch him. It trembled as she brushed his bangs from his face, color blooming on her cheeks as she did. Her finger tips brushed his forehead, but the touch was fleeting enough not to trigger his particular talent. The pain in her eyes made him ache for her. “I was afraid I’d hurt you.”

“Never.” He smiled through the headache that was still pounding behind his temples. Her voice was as soothing as her presence, and he could *feel* the turmoil inside him melting away. “No one made me go through those visions, Padmé. I chose to.”

“Was it worth it? Does it save Qui-Gon’s life?”

He smiled faintly, enjoying the feel of her fingers toying with his hair. “No. But it wasn’t his life I was interested in.”

Her hand stilled and fell away. “I don’t understand. You told me in the chamber that you were trying to see if sending more Jedi would save Qui-Gon’s life.”

“I was more interested in saving yours.” His admission was accompanied with a blush as he forced himself to sit up, bringing them closer, sitting almost hip to hip — but not touching. He lifted his hand slowly and gently returned the favor of removing the bangs from her face, enjoying the silky texture between his fingers before hooking it carefully over one ear. “If I was that interested in Master Jinn’s life, I would have had him at the center of the circle.”

“Then why tell me otherwise?”

“I’ve seen the way you fight for your people, remember? Given the choice between life as a fugitive, and death if it freed your people, you’d choose to die.”

Her eyebrows arched in surprise. “I’m not so old I’d throw my life away.”

“Even if your life means freedom for the people of Naboo? If it means no starving children, no war? If it means a future for your people that you can’t share in?” He shook his

head. “No, Padmé; I know you’d choose to give others freedom, even if it means giving up your own.”

She didn’t deny it, couldn’t, and he knew it from the look in her eyes. She changed tactics. “Don’t you think saving Master Jinn should have been the priority?”

“The Jedi believe freeing Naboo to be the priority. If, by sending more Jedi, they were to unintentionally prevent it from happening, they’d have problems. By watching your future, I can see the impact of their decisions; I can know if it will work or not.”

“You should have told me the truth, Anakin. I can’t believe you went through all that just to see if their plan would end in my death!”

“You’re the only friend I have.” He ducked his head, flushing softly as the image rose unbidden in his mind again — Padmé dressed in marriage whites standing by his side. “I can’t bear the thought of losing you.”

She was silent for long moments and he couldn’t help but wonder if she was thinking the same thing. Finally, her words soft, she answered. “What about Obi-Wan or Master Jinn? Aren’t they your friends too?”

He chanced a look at her and found he was being watched intently, a completely unreadable look in her eyes. He shrugged uncomfortably. “You were my first friend, Padmé. You accepted me for who I am; not what I can do for you. I know you want me to help you save your planet, and I’ll do it willingly — for you — but I—”

“Anakin.”

His head came up at her sharp tone.

“I don’t just want you to help me save my world.”

“You don’t?” His heart sank. If she didn’t want his help, the future could already be changing.

Padmé’s smile banished the dark thought almost immediately. “No. I don’t. I want you to trust me. When this is all over, I’d like it if you’d stay on Naboo and be my friend.”

“Really?”

She laughed and he could see the blush on her cheeks under the make up. “Really. Like you, I know what it is to be forced into a role I’m uncomfortable in. Maybe together we can escape those roles for a while. Besides,” her grin turned cheeky. “You can’t expect to remain a pilot in the defense force without formal training.”

“Formal training?” He blinked, surprised. What was she talking about?

“Well, I know you don’t have any plans once all this is over, and since you’re too old to be a Jedi, I was thinking we could both be icons.”

Her plan was suddenly becoming clear and he stared at her in surprise. She wanted him to share her lime light; to be the joint hero of her world and help her give her people a reason to continue fighting. To give them a role model. But he had to hear it from her. “Are you asking

me — a former slave — to be some type of role model to a freedom loving people like yours?”

“Something like that. I’d like to remain your friend, Anakin.”

“Me too,” he didn’t think as the words slid from between his lips, his mind already on the possibilities she’d just opened up to him. He grinned. “Tell you what, Padmé. If we live through this, you have a deal.” He extended his hand for her to shake.

She looked at his un-gloved hand and then to his face. He arched his eyebrows, daring her, and she shook her head. He tilted his hand, offering it for a slap instead, which she did, quickly, to minimize the contact. “We’ll live through it, Anakin. I only hope you don’t change your mind between now and then.”

She rose to her feet, Anakin following her lead and steadying himself on the large cushion before smiling sheepishly. “Sorry, I’m still a little disoriented.”

“You’re not planning on doing that again, are you?”

“Doing what, falling over?”

“Seeing the future for the council.”

His smile faded. “I’d like to know if the Jedi’s additional forced will change the outcome I’ve foreseen for Qui-Gon.”

“Anakin Skywalker, don’t you dare!”

He stumbled backwards, sitting down heavily on the cushion. Padmé’s eyes blazed righteous anger as she continued, seeming oblivious to his incredulous stare.

“You’re not to do that again, do you hear me? With the state you’re in, you’d be lucky if they just made you violently ill. No! Master Windu will accompany the Jedi with the hope he can be a mitigating factor against this... this threat. I won’t have you putting yourself in harm’s way again.”

“Is that an order, your highness?”

She glared at him and stamped one foot. “If it has to be.” Her expression softened. “I’d rather you consider it’s the impassioned request of a concerned friend.”

He found a smile for her, one that widened as she reached into one fold of her gown and pulled out a very familiar pair of leather gloves. He accepted them, his fingers smoothing over the familiar creases unconsciously before he slid them on. Padmé extended her hand and he took it as she helped him to his feet.

He didn’t relinquish his hold as she led him from the room to inform the council of her decision. It had been made and, for better or worse, Master Windu would accompany them back to Naboo. Anakin only hoped the man would be able to help Qui-Gon and stay out of his way. The trip back to Naboo was going to be hard enough without the backstabbing Jedi hounding his heels. He only hoped Mace would get the idea quickly and leave him alone.

Otherwise, Anakin wouldn’t be held responsible for his actions.

Padmé's decision to return to Naboo was met with trepidation by Senator Palpatine, and Anakin paced nervously in the anteroom as she spoke with him about her decision. Padmé had called for a vote of No confidence in Chancellor Velorum's leadership in the hope of avoiding a similar situation for another planet.

Anakin had been surprised to hear Palpatine had been nominated, especially after the man's speech to the contrary, but his unease with the Senator continued. He wasn't sure what it was about *not* seeing the man's future that disturbed him, simply that it did.

The Jedi Council acted quickly, assignment Mace to go with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to Naboo to help deal with the Sith threat. Qui-Gon had begun his training in control, partial payment for trying to assist the Jedi, and thus far he'd been able to shake the Jedi Master's hand, for several seconds of extended skin-on-skin contact, without visions of the other man's future popping in.

A future that didn't seem changed by Mace's inclusion in their plans.

Qui-Gon ignored it, and so Anakin did his best to as well. It was easier than he'd thought, with his future on Naboo to look forward to. Obi-Wan helped him with his control lessons, and threw in a sense lesson for danger while he was at it. They'd laughed over his reckless behavior, and Anakin could honestly say he was going to miss the other young man when he remained behind with Padmé.

He hadn't dared try and read Obi-Wan's future, and was comfortable not knowing. He would simply enjoy the thrill of the unknown when it came to his Jedi friend. Jar Jar Binks, the Gungan who still accompanied the Queen, had tried to hang around with the two Force Sensitive young men, but quickly become bored with their lack of movements. What he didn't know was that Obi-Wan had smuggled two of the training sabers from the younglings barracks and, once he was certain Anakin and he were alone, often brought them out to help teach Anakin the fundamentals.

Anakin relished the lessons, taking more than one beating about the head and shoulders with the stun saber, but learning quickly. He was disappointed to learn after their fourth session that Obi-Wan had needed to return the stun sabers before they were discovered missing.

The trip back to Naboo would take two days, despite the repairs done to the Nabooian Cruiser, and they were on Coruscant for barely three days more before Padmé informed everyone they would be leaving.

Anakin packed his meager belongings and returned to Padmé's apartments. There, he'd been forced to wait, pacing up and down the corridor, as he was informed the Senator Palpatine was trying to dissuade the Queen from this course of action. He knew nothing the Senator said would change Padmé's mind; not after she'd practically been shown the likely hood of her success by the Force.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan would join them when they reached the landing pad, along with the third Jedi Anakin was torn between welcoming as another target for the Sith, and despising as the traitor and turn coat he was. Palpatine finally emerged from the chamber, his shoulder hunched, shaking his head sadly. He looked so dejected Anakin's basic compassion overrode his unease with the man.

“Senator?”

Palpatine’s head lifted and for a brief moment Anakin thought he saw something dark shift in those fathomless eyes. It was gone barely seconds later, the Senator looking years older and sadder than before. “Anakin, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything you can say to dissuade her from this course?”

“Why would I want to do that, sir?”

“She’s in great danger if she goes back to Naboo, son. *Great* danger. They’ll kill her if she’s captured.”

“She knows that, Senator. She’s adamant to suffer the same punishment or freedoms as the rest of your people.”

“Perhaps she thinks it will spur the Senate to a faster resolution now that they’ve seen her, hm?”

“Somehow, Senator, I doubt that.” Anakin looked away, feeling uncomfortable discussing Padmé with him. “The Queen strong minded and opinionated. There is little anyone can do once she’s made up her mind.”

Palpatine stared at him for a long minute, and Anakin shifted uncomfortably under that look. Palpatine finally smiled, shaking his head. “You understand women far better than I ever did, young man. Perhaps you’re right. Her presence on the planet may indeed give the people hope; if she isn’t captured the moment she lands. You’ll look after her for me, won’t you?”

“Sir?”

“She’s like a daughter to me, Anakin. I couldn’t bear the thought of something happening to her.”

Anakin stared at the man for a long minute, something in Palpatine’s expression not matching his concerned tone or words, but Anakin wasn’t able to figure out what. He finally, reluctantly nodded. “I’ll do what I can, Senator. The Jedi will be far better protectors than I.”

Palpatine nodded his thanks with a slight incline of his head and then turned and disappeared.

It wasn’t until later, when Anakin had stretched out in his bunk, the Nabooian Cruiser already having entered light speed, which the strange expression on the Nabooian Senator’s face finally clicked in his mind.

Palpatine’s eyes.

Those cold, calculating eyes, had never changed, never wavered from shadowed neutrality. For all the lip service the Senator had given, he wasn’t truly concerned about the Queen’s safety, he was simply trying to make it seem that way.

Anakin tucked that fact away for the future and focused himself instead on the task that was ahead of him. Saving Naboo. The Senator’s false sympathies would have to wait until

later.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Anakin spent a good deal of the first day in the cockpit with the pilots, the same ones who had been flying when they'd arrived on Coruscant, and they allowed him to do most of the basics, including lift off. It was until they were in hyperspace that he relaxed and relinquished the much coveted role of pilot. They urged him to get some sleep; he'd need to once arrive at Naboo and they were running the blockade.

Anakin had retied reluctantly to think about his conversation with the Senator and what awaited him in the future. There had been no talk of having him formally trained by the Jedi, not that he'd have accepted the offer, but it had stung they hadn't thought him disciplined enough to qualify. Qui-Gon had told him shortly before take off that he was willing to accept Anakin as a Padawan, but Anakin knew if the Master's fate wasn't change by Mace's presence, there would be no second chance to train.

Instead he set about concentrating on the lessons Qui-gon was teaching him about control and intuition, two very basic, but essential lessons he could feel would be necessary before he was ready. Obi-Wan, more than willing to help his friend, assisted in these drills, and Anakin was delighted by the progress his first day; he was able to hold Qui-Gon's bare hand for more than two minutes without seeing anything. Simply feeling the touch of the Master's calloused fingers.

Padmé hung on the fringes, watching, but not willing to interfere, but Anakin could *feel* her gaze and that, more than anything, pushed him to excel where he might have failed.

Mace avoided the young man for the first day of their several day trip. Keeping to himself, the Jedi Master meditated in the chambers assigned to he and the other Jedi.

It was fine with Anakin; he had no desire to have any contact with the serpent in Jedi's clothing.

Fortunately, he had several hours free each day when either Qui-Gon or Obi-Wan insisted he do something other than train. To help refocus his mind they said. Anakin spent these hours in the cockpit, or — when she was available — with Padmé.

Their third day out, the middle of the trip, Anakin and Padmé were in with the droids and Anakin was checking out the Artoo unit that had saved the ship the last time it had run the blockade...

"I don't suppose getting into the planet will really be that much of an issue," Padmé was saying as she sat on a bench nearby. "The question is really how is such a small force going to be able to liberate my people."

Anakin didn't look up from the back of the Artoo unit as he carefully connected another of the wires. "Is it just the Nabooian people who are suffering?"

“The natives are smart. The Gungans might look awkward and gawky, but they’ve survived generations of incursions into their land. Plans for their extermination, even genocidal attempts from less than understanding leaders. But this threat might be beyond them, as it was us.”

Anakin jumped back as something shorted and a spark sent him reeling back on his behind. He shook his hand, the finger tips having gone numb. “Then maybe that’s your ticket. Jar Jar mentioned something about the Gungans having an army, didn’t he?”

She nodded; a motion he sensed more than saw. “Are you alright?”

“Fine. I just connected the wrong capacitor to his internal drives.” He slanted a look at her. “You’re avoiding the question, Padmé”

She smiled. “Jar Jar mentioned it, but I don’t see how we can possibly expect them to help. The Gungans and the Naboo have been under an uneasy truce since the last time my people tried to push them further into the jungles. We don’t bother them, they don’t bother us.”

“And if you think of it that way, you’ve already lost.”

“So what do you expect me to do; beg?”

“If you have to,” Anakin pushed himself back towards Artoo and connected the correct components before shutting the back plate and rising to his feet, wiping his fingers on a rag. “Is your pride worth more than the fate of your people?”

“Of course not. I just don’t think that begging is going to do any good.”

Anakin grinned, settling himself next to her on the bench. “Some of my best friends were beggars. Believe me; it works on people with pride. Seeing someone beg gives them a feeling of power over that other person. If the Gungans think you consider them equals, at the very least, they might be willing to help.”

“But I do consider them equals.” Padmé looked at him shocked, as if anything else was unthinkable. “They have every right to the planet as we do!”

“Do they know that?”

She fell silent for a few moments. “I think you’re on to something, Ani.” She teased him gently. “How’d you get so smart anyway?”

“To survive in Mos Espa?” He chuckled softly. The sting of having been a slave didn’t hurt as much as it used to. “I learned a few things, that’s all.”

“And from the Jedi?”

He nodded. “A few. Want me to show you?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Aren’t Jedi supposed to use their powers with restraint?”

“True. But I’m no Jedi.”

Her laughter was musical. “Not yet. Alright, show me.”

“Give me your hand.”

She blinked, looking at his bare palm with trepidation. “Anakin, I don’t think—”

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Then give me your hand, Padmé.”

She did so, but slowly, reluctantly, her fingers hovering over his uncertainly. “But, the last time—”

“The last time I hadn’t been shown how to do this.” He collected her hand his own, marvelling at the softness of her skin. The contrast of it against his own. She was pale where he was tanned, slightly calloused fingers indicating that she did as much training as her guards did. He met her gaze and slowly lifted her hand to his lips.

Her eyes widened as his lips settled on the backs of her fingers.

Anakin could feel the way she trembled, her hand quaking in his, but his gaze never left hers. She tasted of spices and flowers. Excitement and peace. The taste of her was too much to pass up and the tip of his tongue darted out to touch the indent between her index and middle finger. She shuddered; he felt it as clearly as if it had been his own reaction. Or it might have been him; he didn’t know.

He released her hand reluctantly, feeling his control beginning to slip, but Padmé remained frozen where she was. Her throat was working, as if she were having difficulty swallowing, but even as she opened her lips no sound came out. Her hand fell between them, barely missing his, even as the continued to stare at each other.

Something shifted between them in those moments, and Anakin felt the urge, the *need* to kiss her — but didn’t dare. His control was chancy at best and now it was shot after having tasted the sweetness of her skin.

“Ani?” His nickname was a confused question on her lips.

Anakin turned, tearing his gaze from hers as he fought against the insistent beat of his heart, his every fiber screaming at him to kiss her. Only the fear of seeing her future, of seeing her *death* held him in check. He didn’t want the maybes to come between them now, didn’t want to see her path diverge from his, which he felt must happen eventually despite his previous visions. Despite the maybes, he didn’t want to *see* at all; he simply wanted to be able to feel. To feel her lips against his, to feel her arms about him; to feel *her*. To taste her.

“Anakin?”

“I’m sorry, Padmé.” His breathing was ragged as he fought himself as much as he fought the want in her. “I can’t.”

“But you just—”

“I know.” He lifted his head and offered a weak smile. “I wanted to impress you.”

Her answering smile was slightly hesitant. “You didn’t see my future?”

He shook his head. “Not a whisper.”

"Then color me impressed." She shifted off the bench, the awkwardness between them suddenly a tangible thing. "I'm going to speak with Jar Jar; your idea bears investigating."

"Your idea, you mean." He didn't even try to stop her. "I was just the sounding board."

"Thank you, Anakin."

He swallowed hard — the look in her eyes wasn't just thanking him for listening. "Your welcome. Good luck."

He collapsed against the wall behind the bench as she disappeared, taking a deep breath to clear his mind. Dealing with Padmé was like playing with fire. He was certain that, eventually, he was going to get burned.

"You have excellent taste in women, Anakin."

Anakin all but jumped from the bench as the absolutely last person he wanted to speak with on the vessel stepped into the room. He was still reeling from Padmé's presence and somehow he knew Mace Windu had deliberately chosen this moment; when he was off balance.

"It's impolite to eavesdrop, Windu; though I suspect it won't keep you up at night."

"Should it?" Mace looked somewhat amused. "Eavesdropping is not a crime, simply morally inadvisable."

"You'd know all about crime, wouldn't you?" Anakin spat the words, feeling his equilibrium quickly returning.

"Things weren't what they seemed on Tatooine, Anakin."

"You mean you didn't play me for a fool and deliver me into Watto's tender care as a Pod jockey?" His words were laced with pain and scorn. "I must be confusing you for someone else, *Kamir*. Should I apologize when it's you who ruined my life?"

"I don't want an apology, Anakin," Mace's tone was level. "I don't want your forgiveness. I'm looking for understanding."

"Then understand this; I want *nothing* to do with you."

Mace stood in the doorway, blocking the only way out, his arms outstretched in a casual posture to brace on either side of the door jamb. "We all have to deal with our past eventually, young Skywalker. I'm giving you the opportunity to deal with yours so it doesn't interfere with your future. You're not the only one who saw the ghosts in the Council Chamber. I know your destiny is linked with hers."

"If you think I'm going to let you come between Padmé and I—"

"I don't intend to." Mace's rebuke was mild. "Look beyond your hatred, Anakin. I'm not trying to come between you; I'm trying to help."

"I've had enough of your brand of *help*, Kamir."

"Mace." His voice was quietly dignified. "I worked very hard to regain my true name after I left Tatooine."

“Am I supposed to be sad for you? You practically ensured I spent the next few years in a hovel, without my *mother* and no chance of being freed! Tell me, *Kamir*, was my freedom a good trade for yours?”

“I’m not proud of having left you in shackles.”

“But you’d do it all again.” Anakin’s words were bitter. “You’d do it all again because it was a turning point, the breaking point that led you back to the Jedi. Forgive me if I don’t feel honored to be the cause of the great Master Mace Windu’s redemption.”

Mace shook his head sadly. “You don’t understand, young man.”

“I don’t *want* to understand. If you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment to keep with Obi-Wan in the cargo bay.”

Mace watched him approach and when Anakin got close, seemed to realize that Anakin wasn’t going to stop. Reluctantly, Mace dropped his arms and stood by for Anakin to pass. Anakin didn’t spare the Jedi Master a look as he headed for the small cargo bay and his next session with Obi-Wan.

Master Mace Windu could beg and ask and desire understanding to the end of the Galaxy for all Anakin cared. He couldn’t bring himself to listen to the man, let alone try and understand what possessed someone to trade another’s life for their own. It was a decision he never intended to have to make.

They arrived on Naboo with Anakin watching the pilot’s fingers fly across the console. They were ducking ships and evading laser fire; running the blockade back *into* Naboo and Anakin was mesmerized.

The ship didn’t go anywhere near the capital city of Theed, but instead followed Jar Jar’s recommendation and landed in a treed area about half a day’s march from the city. They weren’t staying with the ship and, once down, would split into several directions to search for the Gungans and their “sacred place”.

With Jar Jar as their guide, the three Jedi, Anakin, Padmé, her handmaidens and Captain Panaka began their search.

Jar Jar ranged ahead, checking the under water cities for signs of habitation and reported back as finding nothing. It wasn’t unexpected. Padmé sent a coded transmission to her forces to continue searching. The transmission was short enough it couldn’t be traced. With Jar Jar still holding point, they journeyed deeper into the forests and jungles of Naboo.

Anakin had never seen such lush vegetation before. The water, miles deep, where the Gungans made their homes were a novelty. The forest teemed with *life* to the point of being somewhat overwhelming like it had been on Coruscant — but in other ways. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon stayed close, giving him pointers on how to control the sensory input so not to go into overload. He appreciated it, but it meant staying back from Padmé.

Thankfully she was in her decoy outfit as a handmaiden, so she dropped back to walk with him every now and again. Sabé, dressed as the Queen in battle gear, kept her gaze straight ahead, but Anakin knew she wasn’t unaware of her Queen’s attachment to him. He doubted

much escaped the Handmaiden's gaze, and because of that scrutiny, held only short conversations with Padmé.

The near future would determine if they'd be considered worthy of a chance to free both the Gungan and Nabooian people. Whatever the Gungans said and did in the next few hours — once located — would dictate if Anakin's part would remain the same.

Anakin watched in silence as Padmé used her natural charm and charisma to work the Gungans to her side. Mixed with humility, and a plea that would have moved the hardest of hearts, she beseeched the Gungan people to help take back the planet. To begin anew with the Nabooian people as equals. Boss Nass, flattered and delighted, hastily agreed to Padmé's plan once outlined.

The consideration was that the Gungans would be allowed to move freely and trade freely with the Naboo — all racial restrictions were to be removed.

Padmé promised to see the reforms enacted and the Gungan's part in Naboo's liberation sung loudly and proudly so the Nabooians would never forget — if they succeeded.

Anakin hung back, excluding himself from the war party discussion. He knew where he would be and it wouldn't be on the ground watching Padmé's back. That didn't sit well with him. The Jedi, including Mace, were off on their own several feet away, quietly discussing what they thought was the best course of action.

Anakin was joined by Obi-Wan shortly thereafter.

"How're you doing?"

Anakin shrugged. "I feel useless. I know my part in this; I know Qui-Gon's part. The rest is still unknown."

Obi-Wan settled himself next to Anakin, shoulder to shoulder with their backs against one of the massive trees. "Does it bother you?"

"What?"

Obi-Wan picked a blade of grass and twirled it between his fingers. "Seeing possible futures — like my Master's."

Anakin's hands clenched briefly. Bother him? What kind of question was that? It was like asking if poison gas bothered your lungs! He managed to shrug. "It's a part of life; I owe Qui-Gon a lot, Obi-Wan. If there was some way to avoid his fate, I would gladly suggest it. But not at your expense."

"At Mace's?"

Anakin shrugged, looking away uncomfortably to where Padmé and her generals were planning the assault on the city. It gave him an eerie flash of *deja vu*; things were unfolding exactly as he'd seen. "I wouldn't mourn Mace Windu's passing if the Sith should kill him."

Obi-Wan shook his head sadly. "All life is precious, Anakin. Trading one for another because you don't like someone isn't a very Jedi-like quality."

"Then it's a good thing I'm not a Jedi." Anakin pulled the grass from the ground and tossed it away. "I don't expect you to understand, Obi-Wan, but I'd rather lose Mace today than Qui-Gon."

"I'd like to avoid any casualties at all."

"Perfection like that doesn't usually exist." Anakin smiled wryly. "Trust me, I know."

"What about a set up?"

Anakin glanced up. "What do you mean?"

Obi-Wan wave one hand at where the Queen was discussion tactics. "We're setting up diversions to get us into the city; according to your vision Master Jinn doesn't die until we're almost at the city's main power grid, right?"

"So?"

"What if we were to send Master Windu back and around, using us as the diversion to drive the Sith towards that very room. If he could lie in wait for the Sith, both Masters would be there to fight him instead of just Qui-Gon."

Anakin blinked, caught completely off guard by his friend's sudden inspiration. "That... just might work. I don't know how Mace would be able to circle around, though. There are only so many entrances and the most direct will be where you herd him."

"If we can keep him in the hangar bay for long enough, Master Windu's Force abilities should be able to give him enough of an advantage."

"What makes you think anything starts in the hangar bay?"

Obi-Wan's smile was almost secretive. "Deduction, my friend. We have to free the pilots. It's logical to assume that this is where the Queen loses both you and I to different foes, leaving her capable of locating and defeating the Viceroy."

"Point." Anakin looked to where Mace and Qui-Gon were holding a quiet discussion. "Do you think they'd agree?"

"I don't see why not. Though," Obi-Wan frowned. "They might ask me to be the one to sneak in behind the Sith while they keep him occupied."

"Wouldn't that be awkward?"

The young Jedi nodded. "A little. I fight well with my Master *because* he's my master. Everything I know I learned from him. Having Mace fight with him will add an unknown element that might throw everything off and end up in his demise regardless."

"Then just make them see it that way."

"Make us see what?"

Anakin looked up to find Qui-Gon and Mace were standing in front of them. Shading his eyes with one hand, he nodded to his friend. "Obi-Wan has an idea to change your fate and still destroy the Sith."

Qui-Gon's smile was proud. "Of course he does; he's a wiser and smarter man than most."

Obi-Wan's cheeks heated for a moment as he ducked his head in humility. "You're kind to say so Master."

"What's this idea of yours, Obi-Wan?"

Anakin settled back against the trunk as Obi-Wan outlined his idea to the two Masters. As he predicted, Mace wanted to be the one to fight initially with Qui-Gon — until Anakin broke in with why it wasn't advisable to change that part of the vision. Reluctantly, Mace finally agreed to be the one to sneak around, masking his presence from the Sith as he set up the ambush.

When the Jedi had finally left, Obi-Wan going with them to discuss tactics of their own, Anakin relaxed and his gaze drifted back to where Padmé was arguing with Captain Panaka, fire blazing from her eyes. She was giving no quarter and was determined to have her way.

Good. She was going to need that fire in the upcoming battle. That and more if she hoped to free her people. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the trunk and tried to find that center of peace Qui-Gon was telling him could balance out his emotions before great conflict.

Somewhere in the middle of it, he felt Padmé's gaze on him and smiled, drifting off to sleep with an image of her in his mind.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Anakin dove for cover as the battle droids opened fire on the group of pilots and their rescuers. He crouched low behind one of the fighters, shielding his eyes from the shrapnel produced by the blasts with one hand. He ducked behind one of the ladders and the scrambled up to the Nabooian fighter without being told. The rest of the pilots ran for cover and for their ships as Padmé's order rang clearly through the blaster noise.

Lightsabers flashed, blue and green as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon provided a defense for the Queen and her entourage, shielding the pilots as best they could as they headed for their ships. Anakin caught a brief glimpse of Mace rounding the exterior of the hangar bay and ducking to the opposite side of one of the pillars beside the main door the others were headed for. Unencumbered and unseen, the Jedi Master might have been a breeze.

Anakin lost sight of him as he dropped into the cockpit. He waved a two fingered salute to Padmé and then to Obi-Wan, silently wishing them luck and praying Qui-Gon would live through the next few hours. He punched the power switches, Artoo whirling and tooting as he was sucked into the astromech droid socket behind him. "I know, Artoo, relax. I've got it."

Artoo twittered as Anakin pulled the helmet — which had been conveniently on the ground by his feet — over his head. Anakin then adjusted the goggles and powered up the main drives. Several fighters shot out of the hangar ahead of him, one being clipped by the Palace's defensive systems to spiral away towards the ground. He gripped the stick, glancing out the view port for a moment in time to see the Sith appear, robed all in black, a menacing smile crossing his lips as a dual bladed lightsaber sprung to life. Padmé and her guards veered away as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon moved to intercept the threat.

Of Mace there was no sign.

Anakin saw no more as the catapult under the ship moved him into launch position and then was forced back into the seat as it sent him blasting out of the hangar. He spun the fighter around the moment the ship cleared the lip, avoiding the blaster fire, and pulling for space.

The chatter of the other pilots was loud in the cockpit, distracting him as he searched the strange navigational board for sensors. "Artoo, see if you can cut the volume, will you?"

The noise almost instantly faded to half volume and Anakin noted several toggles he recognized from the transport as communications, sensors and auto pilot. He flicked sensors, and a read-out appeared almost immediately, indicating they were several minutes from the droid control ship.

"How're you doing back there, Artoo?"

Artoo twittered, making a concerned sound.

“We’ll be fine. We have to take out that ship if we want Padmé and the others to succeed. Not to mention the Gungans will be slaughtered if we don’t.”

Artoo made a rude noise.

Anakin chuckled. “I’m not fond of them either, but we can’t exactly be picky about our allies. Give me a read out before those fighters reach us of what kind of weapons we have on this thing, would ya?”

Artoo did so, the armaments compliment scrolling past quickly. Anakin winced. Ouch; he only had four torpedoes and blasters. How was he supposed to take out the droid control ship with just that? He took a deep breath, relaxing, and did something he’d only done on the track before. He gave himself over to the Force.

It flowed through him, clear and pure, like he was a conduit strictly there for its purpose. The stick shifted in his hands, his fingers flying over the buttons with an instinct of their own as the little Nabooian fighter spiraled into the fray. The chatter continued as the pilots threw worries back and forth, their blasters doing little against the behemoth’s shields.

One pilot and then another dropped as vulture droids joined the fray, augmenting the point defense system of the control ship. Anakin could feel each life in the brief moment it was snuffed out and did his best to ignore the pain. These pilots wouldn’t die in vain.

Artoo twittered a warning and then screamed as Anakin skimmed the side of the droid control ship and sent them into a corkscrew maneuver he’d only ever read about and never tried. The ships behind him were unable to compensate and smashed into the shields of the control ship. Anakin sent the fighter to the very edge of its limits, overheating the engines as it screamed along the surface and into the center portion of the ship with the control systems. Letting the Force guide his movements, he didn’t hesitate to send the fighter into the hangar bay, blasting away with his lasers as he did.

Explosions rocked the bay, sending his ship into shut down, and he was thrown against the crash webbing as the ship hit the deck, sliding along it to the end before stopping.

“This is not good, Artoo.” Anakin flicked several of the switches, getting nothing. “I think I pushed it too hard.”

Artoo twittered, drawing Anakin’s head up. Droids were picking themselves up off the deck and racing to eliminate the fires. Several had taken an interest in the lone Nabooian craft now inside their bay and were approaching cautiously.

“Not good at all.”

Artoo screeched something and Anakin cast a glance over his shoulder at the small astromech. “That was uncalled for. Relax, would you? I’ve got it all in hand.”

Anakin checked the starter, watching the gauge above it dropping rapidly and prayed silently that the gauge was a heat indicator. Pressing the starter several times, Anakin glanced nervously at the approaching droids. They were lifting their blasters, setting their aim... and the fighter craft roared to life. Anakin grabbed the stick, his fingers flying of their own accord over the firing controls. Missiles and laser bolts shot from the ship, lines of destructions that caused a massive explosion on the far side of the deck.

Artoo let out a warning hoot and Anakin nodded. "Let's get out of here, Artoo!"

Pushing the stick forward, Anakin sent the ship careening out of the hangar bay moments before the doors slammed closed, indicating a loss of atmospheric pressure. He let out a whoop of excitement as the explosion followed him out of the bay, the shields of his ship rippling as they absorbed the energy.

He shot out into space, exhilaration flowing through his veins, the rush of excitement as close to pod racing as he'd come since leaving Tatooine. His whoop was echoed by the other Nabooian pilots as the ship began to self-destruct and the cheer was soon bouncing back and forth over the comm line. The remaining pilots formed up on Anakin as he spun the fighter in a tight circle and looped back towards the planet. Behind them, the droid control ship exploded a final time, leaving it a mass of space dust that would soon disperse in the solar winds.

Anakin didn't remember the flight back to the hangar deck, but he did remember crawling out of the fighter with a whoop and a cheer, only to be lifted onto the shoulders of the other pilots who were hailing him a hero. They paraded him through the hallway, letting him down once they reached the main staircase where an ecstatic Padmé launched herself into his arms with a laugh and a cheer.

A smiling Obi-Wan greeted his friend warmly, Qui-Gon and Mace flanking him. Anakin's knees buckled in relief upon seeing Qui-Gon alive and if it hadn't been for Padmé's arm tight around his waist, he'd have sunk to the floor. Qui-Gon moved forward to help support him. "You did it, Anakin."

"We did it, Master Jinn." His gaze took in everyone, including Mace. "Even Master Windu."

Qui-Gon squeezed the young man's shoulders. "Well said, Anakin. Well said."

Epilogue

Epilogue

The celebration of the liberated Naboo and Gungan forces filled the streets of Theed with energy that Anakin had a hard time dealing with. It was invasive and contagious, making him want to burst out into joyous laughter spontaneously; an odd thing for someone of his background who had never laughed much.

He was obligated to stand beside Padmé during the ceremony in which she officially kept her word to the Gungan people. He'd been proud to stand beside the most beautiful woman on the grounds. Proud and at humbled. Of all the people she could have chosen, she'd kept her word to him too. They were icons to the Nabooian people, symbols of everything good. Of people willing to fight for what was right, no matter the odds.

The Jedi council was there as well, as were Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon. The former had been given his knighthood. Mace had backed Qui-Gon's recommendation, and Obi-Wan had been knighted with the highest honors a Jedi could achieve. Qui-Gon, on the other hand, had informed him just that morning that he would be staying on Naboo. Partially as a continued presence to protect the Queen but mostly as a favor to Anakin to honor his promise to continue Anakin's Jedi training.

Anakin had mixed feelings about the whole thing.

He'd spoken with Obi-Wan about his impressions of The Nabooian Senator, his lack of visions before being able to control them, and the unease he felt around the man. Obi-Wan, who already had an inherent distrust of senators and their functions, had promised to keep a close, if discreet, eye on the man who had recently been selected as the successor to Chancellor Vellorum. Anakin had forced himself to let go of the feeling, and trust in his friend to do the right thing.

Obi-Wan was a good man and a good Jedi; hopefully he'd be able to keep whatever plans the new Chancellor had in check.

It was later that night, after all the festivities had died down, that Anakin found himself sitting on the private balcony of the Queen's suites, looking out over the still celebrating city of Theed, that he marveled at his new circumstances.

"Not exactly where you pictured yourself at this point in your life, is it?"

Anakin smiled. "No, Master Qui-Gon. I can't thank you enough for wanting to stay."

Qui-Gon shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest. "The alternative was to pick another Padawan now that Obi-Wan's been knighted. There's something about you, Anakin, which tells me you have the potential for greatness. Great good, or great evil."

"A Force vision, Master?"

Qui-Gon chuckled. "Not exactly. More like, an intuition."

“So it’s not something you’ve seen.”

“No.” Qui-Gon glanced behind him. “Though I do see a beautiful young lady walking this way.”

Anakin’s eyes sparkled as Padmé stepped out onto the balcony with a sigh. Her color was high, but her face was refreshing clear of make up now that her official part of the day was finished. “What a night!”

“You’re telling me. I’ve never seen so many people in one place before!”

She laughed, settling herself in one of the many chairs lining the patio. “I wouldn’t get used to it. This is just Theed and we rarely celebrate the way we did today. Though, there are a great many requests to meet the Hero in the Battle of Naboo.”

“Requests?” Anakin shrank back, intimidated. “I thought I just had to smile and wave.”

Padmé threw one of the lounge’s pillows at him. “School appearances, public speaking, special functions, military academy appearances. It’s just the beginning.”

“Not to mention flight school and your control sessions with me.”

Anakin grimaced. “I had more free time as a slave!”

Qui-Gon arched his eyebrows at his somewhat apprentice. “Then choose those which you feel are necessary and send your regrets to others. Consider it training, instead of public service.”

“Training?”

Qui-Gon took two steps forward and clapped one hand on Anakin’s shoulder. “A Jedi must be both warrior and diplomat, Anakin. Plus, shaking the hands of strangers without your gloves will be good practice for your control skills. Eventually it should become a natural reaction you have to think about not doing, instead of doing.”

Anakin slanted a look at Padmé. She’d stretched out in the recliner, her head tilted back towards the heavens and her eyes were closed. A reaction he didn’t think about. Yeah. He liked that. He liked that idea a lot. He turned back to Qui-Gon, meeting the Master’s knowing look with an unabashed grin. If he wanted to ever have a chance at a normal future with Padmé, that reaction would need to be so programmed it became an instinct; and Qui-Gon had offered it to him on a silver platter.

“So when do we start?”

fin

Author’s Note: That’s it; it’s over. :O Wow, is it ever over, talk about crazy! I had intended to end it with Anakin having been telling a bed time story to one of their children, but this way makes much more sense — and it leaves it open to interpretation for Ep2 and Ep3 AUs :D

I hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it — I can't thank **Knight-Andar** enough for the original plot bunny, or **Jaded Rose** for her unwavering support and rabid bunnies that built on the first one.

Some of you have noted that you've seen this fic before — you're right. I originally posted it over at theforce boards as I do with 99 of my Star Wars work. Few stories get posted here first, and the epics are often finished before I will even consider posting them here to avoid having incomplete stories. That said — I have a dozen more stories that are longer which are being re-formatted for this site and are longer than three or four chapters. Expect them as I have time to format.

Thank you for being a wonderful audience — and remember, review, review, review!